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A WIFE WITHOUT A SMILE

A WIFE WITHOUT A SMILE

A Comedy in Disguise

In Three Acts

By

ARTHUR W. PINERO

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A Wife Without a Smile

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A Wife Without a Smile

THE PERSONS OF THE PLAY

SEYMOUR RIPPINGILL.
HAYNES WEBBMARSH.
VIVIAN TROOD.
JOHN PULLINGER.
FOLEY.

MRS. RIPPINGILL.
MRS. WEBBMARSH.
MRS. LOVETTE.
BATES.

Scene—the Boat-house in the grounds of Mr. Rippingill's residence at Taplow. Time—a week-end in July.

ADVERTISEMENT

As it is quite uncertain at what point, if at any, the interest of this piece commences, the audience is respectfully requested to be seated at the rise of the curtain.

A Wife Without a Smile

THE FIRST ACT

The scene is a room in a "boat-house" belonging to a villa at Taplow. On the left is a double-door. When this door is open a dwarf wall is seen, forming the embankment of the garden and running in a direct line away from the spectator into the distance. On the extreme left, parallel with this wall, is the opposite side of the river. The garden is represented as being some eighteen feet above the river level, and that part of the embankment-wall nearest to the audience is supposed to end in a flight of steps leading down to the actual boat-house and the river-bank. At the back of the room there is a deep bay-window with cushioned seats; and on the right is an archway admitting to a hall of moderate size, in which, opening from extensive grounds, is another door.

The walls and ceiling of the room are of polished wood, the ceiling being supported by beams. A cottage piano and a music-stool stand on the right of the bay-window. Also on the right are an armchair, a small table, and a settee; and, against the wall, a sideboard and a smoking-table. Some dishes of fruit and the remains of the more substantial items of a morning meal are on the sideboard, and on the smoking-table are boxes of cigarettes and cigars, an array of pipes, a

match-stand, and a jar of tobacco. On the left, laid for breakfast, is a large oval table at which a settee and three chairs supply seats for five persons; and further to the left, against the wall, is a writing-table. Other articles of furniture, of a light kind, occupy spaces not provided for in this description.

A telephone is attached to the wall at the back, on the right. The window-seat is strewn with newspapers and magazines. Head-gear in great variety hangs on a hat-stand in the hall.

Just outside the hall-door a garden-ladder rests against a veranda which surrounds the house. Creepers cling to the veranda. The window and the hall-door are open and the sun is shining brilliantly.

[NOTE :—"*Right*" *and* "*Left*," *unless expressly stated to be the right or left of a personage in the play, are the spectators' right and left, not the actor's.*]

[AVIS (MRS. RIPPINGILL), CHRISTABEL (MRS. WEBBMARSH), HAYNES WEBBMARSH, SEYMOUR RIPPINGILL, *and* MRS. LOVETTE *are seated at the table on the left, finishing breakfast.* AVIS *is at the head of the table, facing the spectator;* CHRISTABEL *and* RIPPINGILL *are on her right,* WEBBMARSH *and* MRS. LOVETTE *on her left. The ladies are in dainty summer gowns, the men in flannels.* FOLEY, *a manservant, is busying himself at the sideboard; presently, carrying a tray laden with breakfast-things, he withdraws, passing through the hall and disappearing into the garden.* RIPPINGILL *is at the end of a funny story and everybody is more or less amused except* AVIS, *whose face wears an expression of settled melancholy.*

RIPPINGILL.

[*A volatile, yet precise, little gentleman of forty-four.*] Ha, ha! ho, ho, ho!

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*A handsome woman of uncertain age, bright and prepossessing.*] Ha, ha, ha, ha! Nonsense! it couldn't have happened; it's impossible.

RIPPINGILL.

Pardon me; many things are improbable, nothing is impossible.

CHRISTABEL.

[*A sparkling brunette, two or three years senior to* AVIS.] What did the man do?

RIPPINGILL.

Apologized profusely. What *could* he do?

WEBBMARSH.

[*Five-and-thirty, tall, lean, curly-headed, moustached.*] And she—the lady——?

RIPPINGILL.

Fled down-stairs and jumped into a passing hansom. I won't answer another question. Ha, ha—ha——!

[*His laughter flickers out, extinguished by* AVIS'S *silence, and he exchanges glances with* MRS. LOVETTE *and shrugs his shoulders.*

WEBBMARSH.

Congratulate you, Seymour. Quite up to high-water mark.

CHRISTABEL.

[*To* RIPPINGILL.] Your stock is inexhaustible; and you are such a wonderful mimic.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*To* AVIS.] You don't hear this to-day for the first time, that is evident, Mrs. Rippingill.

AVIS.

[*A pretty, childlike young woman of three-and-twenty, with an abundance of fair hair, turning doleful eyes upon* MRS. LOVETTE.] Yes, I've not heard it before.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Really !

RIPPINGILL.

[*Wiping his brow.*] Phew ! [*To* CHRISTABEL.] More strawberries ?

CHRISTABEL.

No, thanks.

RIPPINGILL.

[*To* MRS. LOVETTE.] Dora ? I insist.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Three or four. They're delicious.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Rising.*] My own growing. [*In a whisper, as he takes her plate.*] Now ! your tale of old Lady Whitstable and the pickled salmon ! try it !

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Also in a whisper.*] I can't. She paralyzes me.

RIPPINGILL.

For my sake, dear friend. It's irresistible. [*Aloud, moving to the sideboard.*] I am begging Mrs. Lovette to give us her story of a supper-party at old Lady Whitstable's.

WEBBMARSH.

Ah! capital.

[RIPPINGILL, *standing at the sideboard, watches* AVIS *eagerly. He spoons strawberries on to* MRS. LOVETTE'S *plate, letting some of them fall to the floor.*

CHRISTABEL.

Old Lady Whitstable—she is still alive, isn't she?

MRS. LOVETTE.

Alive! I was playing Bridge with her for an hour yesterday. She's only eighty-seven.

WEBBMARSH.

Only!

MRS. LOVETTE.

Oh, a widow may live to any age, when she's properly provided for. I intend to do so, frankly.

CHRISTABEL.

You hear that, Haynes? I hope you are insuring your life heavily.

WEBBMARSH.

Not I. A literary gent is entitled to die without a farthing.

CHRISTABEL.

Heartless!

WEBBMARSH.

What about widowers, Mrs. Lovette?

MRS. LOVETTE.

They generally shorten their lives by remarrying.

WEBBMARSH.

Merci. I'll remember your warning.

CHRISTABEL.

[*Holding out her hand lovingly.*] Haynes, don't chaff. I can't bear it.

WEBBMARSH.

[*Pressing her hand.*] Forgive me, Christabel.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Impatiently.*] Yes, yes, yes—but Lady Whitstable's supper-party ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

Well, the incident arose out of a little supper at her house in Onslow Gardens——

RIPPINGILL.

Ha, ha! ho, ho! This is exquisite. Listen, Avis.

MRS. LOVETTE.

The function took place in her bedroom; they can't move her, you know ——

AVIS.

[*Rousing herself.*] Talking of bedrooms, I've forgotten to ask if you were comfortable in yours last night, Mrs. Lovette.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Dropping strawberries.*] Tscht, tscht, tscht!

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Chilled.*] Oh—oh, most comfortable.

AVIS.

Some people loathe a strange bed.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Advancing, the plate of strawberries in his hand.*] Avis, Avis—Lady Whitstable and the pickled salmon. Now, consider for a moment, my pet—reflect. What a grotesque contrast! A fine, crusted specimen of our English aristocracy and—pickled fish! The mere contemplation of two images so violently opposed in itself makes for mirth. Doesn't it, dearest?

AVIS.

[*Meekly.*] I suppose it does, Seymour.

RIPPINGILL.

Suppose! How obvious! [*In* MRS. LOVETTE'S *ear as he places the strawberries before her.*] Go ahead.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Well, on this particular occasion ——

RIPPINGILL.

Ha, ha, ha!

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*To* RIPPINGILL.] Be quiet! [*Resuming.*] On this—on this particular—on this —— [*Breaking down under* AVIS'S *pensive gaze.*] Oh, gracious!

RIPPINGILL.

Hey? What's wrong?

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Weakly.*] I—I've been put off it.

RIPPINGILL.

No, no!

WEBBMARSH *and* CHRISTABEL.

Please ——

[*There is a knock at the door on the left.*

RIPPINGILL.

[*Raising his voice.*] Who's there?

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*To* RIPPINGILL, *as the others turn their heads towards the door.*] Incurable!

[*The door opens and* VIVIAN TROOD *presents himself, his blazer on his arm, his shirt-sleeves rolled back to his elbows. He is a good-looking, boyish young man of six-and-twenty, lofty and supercilious in manner.*

TROOD.

Morning. Am I in the way?

RIPPINGILL.

In the way! [*Pointing to the breakfast-table.*] We kept a vacant place for you on the chance ——

TROOD.

[*Putting on his jacket.*] Sorry. [*Shaking hands with* AVIS *and* CHRISTABEL.] Morning. [*Nodding to* WEBBMARSH.] How d'ye do?

WEBBMARSH.

How are you?

RIPPINGILL.

[*To* MRS. LOVETTE, *who is eating her strawberries.*] Let me introduce my young friend Mr. Trood—Mrs. Lovette.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Delighted.

RIPPINGILL.

One of our rising artists.

MRS. LOVETTE.

But not an early rising artist, eh?

RIPPINGILL.

Ha, ha, ha! Good! You missed that, Avis.

AVIS.

[*Dully.*] Missed what, Seymour?

RIPPINGILL.

H'm—never mind. [*Going to the smoking-table.*] Pipes!

WEBBMARSH.

[*To* AVIS.] May I——?

AVIS.

Of course.

WEBBMARSH.

[*Joining* RIPPINGILL *and filling his pipe from the tobacco-jar.*]

"*Sublime tobacco! which from east to west,*
Cheers the tar's labor or the Turkman's rest."

Byron.

RIPPINGILL.

"*Whose spreading evil we—ah—we must learn to smother,*
Or stunt the schoolboy and unsex his mother."

Rippingill! Ha, ha, ha!

MRS. LOVETTE.

The readiness of the creature!

THE WEBBMARSHES.

Admirable!

TROOD.

[*Seating himself in the armchair.*] I dropped in to inquire what the arrangements are for this morning—whether I may be allowed to share in them.

RIPPINGILL.

Your fate is in the hands of the ladies: I have to be busy with my head-gardener until lunch. [*Offering him a box of cigarettes.*] Ismalun's?

TROOD.

[*Producing his cigarette-case.*] Thanks; I prefer my own. [*To* AVIS.] I say, Mrs. Rippingill! I've done the deed.

AVIS.

The deed?

TROOD.

Taken on my cottage at Cookham for August.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Advancing to the settee on the right.*] Bravo!

CHRISTABEL.

The sweet little nest I was so envious over yesterday!

RIPPINGILL.

They've stuck you pretty considerably?

TROOD.

Frightful.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Lighting his pipe.*] Pish! you'll be inspired to paint a picture that will make your fortune. Corot, and that sort of caper, what?

TROOD.

Oh, I'm full of ideas.

AVIS.

[*To* MRS. LOVETTE.] Shall we move?

MRS. LOVETTE.

Certainly.

[AVIS *and* CHRISTABEL *retire to the bay-window, where* WEBBMARSH, *emitting clouds of tobacco-smoke, is already ensconced.* MRS. LOVETTE *remains at the table for a few moments, brushing crumbs from her dress and otherwise putting herself in order.*

RIPPINGILL.

Now, *I've* a notion for the composition of a landscape. Ha, ha! the presumptuous amateur! It flashed across me after our recent discussion on Symbolism in Art ——

TROOD.

[*Rising.*] Yes, but we won't keep the ladies hanging about.

RIPPINGILL.

You're right; another time ——

[TROOD *joins the group at the window.* MRS. LOVETTE *is leaving the table.*

RIPPINGILL.

[*Under his breath.*] Dora?

MRS. LOVETTE.

Eh?

RIPPINGILL.

[*Rising.*] Sssh! [*Drawing her towards the right.*] I confess to being grievously disappointed at the failure of

your inimitable description of Lady Whitstable and the pickled salmon. I had set my hopes upon it, in a great measure.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Failure! You can't say the beastly thing failed; it never made a start.

RIPPINGILL.

True.

MRS. LOVETTE.

I didn't catch the salmon, much less pickle it.

RIPPINGILL.

Perhaps later in the day ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

Not for worlds. She freezes my spine, that glum little wife of yours.

RIPPINGILL.

You see my letters have not overstated the case, Dora. *It is* a decided defect in her disposition?

MRS. LOVETTE.

Appalling. To-morrow is Sunday, too! I feel inclined to take the first train back to town.

RIPPINGILL.

In mercy, don't! You heard me tell young Trood, as an excuse for my remaining at home this morning, that I am engaged with Phillips, the gardener?

MRS. LOVETTE.

Yes.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Chuckling.*] Ha, ha! *you're* Phillips. [*Seriously.*] It

will be such a relief to me, dear old friend, to unburden myself to you *vivâ voce*.

MRS. LOVETTE.

But what excuse can *I* make for shirking these girls?

RIPPINGILL.

Oh, I leave that to you. You were a girl once.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Seymour!

RIPPINGILL.

I beg your pardon. What I mean is that two young women of—er—much the same age are always ready to forego the privilege of the society of one who is a great deal—that is, a few years ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

You'd better stop; you're getting deeper and deeper.

[FOLEY, *the man-servant, and* BATES, *a parlor-maid, have entered from the garden, the former carrying a large, light, wooden box, corded and labeled.*

FOLEY.

[*Showing the box to* RIPPINGILL.] A porter has brought this from the station, sir. It's marked "urgent."

[RIPPINGILL, *having glanced at the label, hurriedly takes the box from the man.*

RIPPINGILL.

Thank you, Foley; thank you. [*To* MRS. LOVETTE.] Cover me; spread yourself out.

[*She places herself between him and the group at the window while he goes down upon his knees and secretes the box under the settee.* FOLEY *joins* BATES, *who has a tray in her hand, and assists her to clear the breakfast-table.*

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*To* RIPPINGILL.] What on earth have you there? What are you concealing?

RIPPINGILL.

Toys.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Toys!

RIPPINGILL.

Of a purely diverting character. Ordered 'em from Hamley's yesterday—gave the firm *carte-blanche*—this season's novelties. [*Getting to his feet.*] Are you familiar with the Dying Pig?

MRS. LOVETTE.

I've not that pleasure.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Beaming.*] It's irresistible.

MRS. LOVETTE.

They are to be a surprise for your wife?

RIPPINGILL.

[*With a nod of assent.*] I shall distribute them about the room during her absence. [*Wiping his brow again.*] I want them to burst upon her.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Dubiously.*] You fancy *they* may cause those stony features of hers to relax?

RIPPINGILL.

Ouf! I'm determined to leave no stone unturned—not even stony features. [*Tickled at his joke.*] Ha, ha, ha! [*The group at the window breaks up.*] Quick!

[*Passing her across to the settee.*] Sit down. [*Pointing to the box.*] Put your feet in front of it.

MRS. LOVETTE.

It's so enormous.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Thoughtlessly.*] Yes, but your feet will hide it.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Sitting.*] Well, I'm sure!

RIPPINGILL.

I *beg* your pardon. What I meant was—— [*To* AVIS, *who now approaches followed by the* WEBBMARSHES.] My pet?

AVIS.

Mr. and Mrs. Webbmarsh won't go on the river this morning, Seymour. Mr. Webbmarsh has some reviewing to do. [*To* WEBBMARSH.] I'll run up-stairs and make sure that your table is in order.

WEBBMARSH.

Pray don't trouble——

[AVIS *disappears, entering the hall and turning sharp round to her right.*

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Interested.*] Reviewing?

RIPPINGILL.

[*Slyly.*] Reviewing?

WEBBMARSH.

Yes, I must plough through the second volume of the "Life of Disraeli" before dinner, somehow or other.

RIPPINGILL.

And—ah—ahem!—Mrs. Webbmarsh?

WEBBMARSH.

[*Constrainedly.*] Oh—ah—Christabel—I dictate notes to Christabel as I read. That's the process.

RIPPINGILL.

Ha, ha, ha! Oh, that's the process, is it? Ho, no!

MRS. LOVETTE.

Now what is the man laughing at?

RIPPINGILL.

[*To* CHRISTABEL.] Shall I tell tales, Mrs. Christabel?

CHRISTABEL.

I don't care a rap. You're thinking of yesterday ——

RIPPINGILL.

[*To* MRS. LOVETTE.] I've placed the room above this at Mr. Webbmarsh's disposal, Dora—for his reviewing. Ha, ha, ha! And yesterday, having occasion to speak a word to the reviewer, I—ho, ho!—no, it isn't fair of me ——

CHRISTABEL.

I'll supply the sequel. Mr. Rippingill found me sitting beside Haynes on the sofa, my head resting on his shoulder.

RIPPINGILL.

Volume One upon the floor—discreetly, face downward. The process of reviewing!

MRS. LOVETTE.

Mr. and Mrs. Webbmarsh may have been reviewing the events of their courtship.

CHRISTABEL.

Extremely nice of you, Mrs. Lovette.

MRS. LOVETTE.

I gather that, like our host and hostess, you are newly-married people.

CHRISTABEL.

[*Slipping her arm through* WEBBMARSH'S.] We've scarcely yet realized that we *are* married, have we, Haynes, dear?

WEBBMARSH.

[*Annoyed.*] At any rate, my day is to be devoted to work, and my wife promises me her sympathetic assistance. [*To* CHRISTABEL, *stiffly.*] We will make a start, Christabel.

CHRISTABEL.

Au'voir, till lunch!

[WEBBMARSH *and* CHRISTABEL *withdraw, in the direction taken by* AVIS. RIPPINGILL *whistles softly.*

MRS. LOVETTE.

Too bad of you, Seymour!

RIPPINGILL.

[*Lowering his voice.*] H'm! sad. Upon my soul, my imagination fails to conceive a more deplorable spectacle than that of a man incapable of enjoying a laugh against himself.

MRS. LOVETTE.

The difficulty lies in persuading the live lobster that the boiling process is dignified and entertaining.

RIPPINGILL.

But Webbmarsh! who used to have the keenest appreciation of fun! A couple of months ago he would have roared at my harmless banter.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Two months ago?

RIPPINGILL.

When we were lobsters—bachelors. Now it's nothing but bill and coo, bill and coo, from morn till eve. [*Moving over to the left as* AVIS *reenters and returns to* MRS. LOVETTE.] Ha, ha, ha! His critique in the *Bi-weekly* should be a gem! [*Wiping tears of laughter from his eyes.*] The process of reviewing!

[*By this time the servants have cleared the table and sideboard and have departed, carrying the rest of the breakfast-things on trays.* TROOD, *who has remained at the window reading a newspaper, now approaches* AVIS.

TROOD.

I hope Mrs. Lovette is coming with us, Mrs. Rippingill.

AVIS.

[*To* MRS. LOVETTE.] Mr. Trood proposes to take us up to Marlow, Mrs. Lovette.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Exceedingly kind of Mr. Trood, but I'd rather you all went your own ways and let me to potter about here alone.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Hypocritically.*] My dear Dora!

MRS. LOVETTE.

I'm a tired town-woman, recollect—stale as old shoes.

AVIS.

Oh, it shall be exactly as you wish, naturally.

TROOD.

Dreadfully grieved.

[*He goes out at the door on the left, leaving the door open.*

AVIS.

[*To* RIPPINGILL.] Seymour, *you* will ——?

RIPPINGILL.

Can't, my pet ; most important letter to write.

AVIS.

Why, a little while ago it was the gardener ——

RIPPINGILL.

[*Hastily.*] Yes, yes—I'm writing to the gardener.

AVIS.

Writing to the gardener!

RIPPINGILL.

[*Smiling fatuously.*] It does sound singular—but it isn't. I can't stand the heat of the sun. That's the simple fact—I *cannot* stand the sun.

AVIS.

But Phillips could see you up at the house, or here.

RIPPINGILL.

[*In difficulties.*] My dear Avis, it may be an old-fashioned prejudice on my part ; but, ever since I have been in a position to employ a gardener, it has been a settled conviction with me that—er—his appropriate place is in the garden.

AVIS.

[*Gloomily.*] As you please. I have to give some orders to the cook; tell Mr. Trood he must wait five minutes for me.

RIPPINGILL.

I will, dearest.

[*She takes a hat from the stand and goes.* RIPPINGILL *bustles away and calls to* TROOD *from over the dwarf wall.*

RIPPINGILL.

Mrs. Rippingill has gone up to the house to attend to some domestic duties. She'll be with you shortly.

TROOD.

[*From below.*] All right.

[RIPPINGILL *comes back into the room.* MRS. LOVETTE, *who has accompanied* AVIS *to the hall-door, faces him, laughing.*

RIPPINGILL.

Eh?

MRS. LOVETTE.

Seymour, you're a beautiful story-teller; but, oh, what a contemptible hand at a fib!

RIPPINGILL.

Ha, ha, ha! [*Gallantly.*] I ought to be able to return the compliment, but I can't.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Fanning herself with a fan which she carries.*] Well, I never!

RIPPINGILL.

I *beg* your pardon. [*Seating himself in a chair on the*

left and rubbing his head.] The truth is, Dora, I sometimes find my wife's baby face and round eyes a trifle discomposing.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Thoughtfully.*] Seymour ——

RIPPINGILL.

[*Catching her mood.*] Dear friend?

MRS. LOVETTE.

Your first wife was possessed of no sense of humor, either, was she?

RIPPINGILL.

[*After a pause.*] Not in the faintest degree.

MRS. LOVETTE.

What an odd fatality!

RIPPINGILL.

[*Staring before him.*] It is—rummy.

MRS. LOVETTE.

That it should befall you, of all persons!

RIPPINGILL.

Precisely! I who managed to preserve, throughout twenty years of servitude in a government office, what I claim may be fairly described as an almost abnormal perception of the ludicrous!

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Laying her fan upon his shoulder.*] However, taking one thing with another, you haven't much to complain of.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Jumping up.*] Complain of! [*Soberly.*] Ahem! On the contrary, apart from my—ahem!—my—er ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

It was unfeeling of me to remind you of it.

RIPPINGILL.

[*With a wave of the hand.*] My unfortunate maiden matrimonial venture, I regard myself as the luckiest devil in existence. Why, only think! Just as I was becoming sick to death of the office; just as my remarkable sense of humor *was* perhaps beginning to show signs of wear and tear ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Looking out of the window.*] You drop in for all this!

RIPPINGILL.

Delightful, hey? [*Walking away to the right.*] This boat-house was my Uncle Horace's last addition to the property. [*Sitting on the settee.*] Poor old Horace! [*Taking his pipe from his pocket.*] Bless me, how fond the old chap would have been of Avis! *He* was totally destitute of humor also.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Turning from the window abruptly.*] Seymour, what passes my comprehension is that the child's lamentable deficiency didn't dawn on you sooner. Not that it would have made any difference ——

RIPPINGILL.

[*Discovering that his pipe still contains some tobacco, and relighting it.*] My dear Dora, our engagement followed a particularly superficial knowledge of each other's idiosyncrasies.

MRS. LOVETTE.

But during your engagement!

RIPPINGILL.

Experience teaches me that that period is often

marked by a suspension of the faculty of observation. Added to which, it was as brief as our previous acquaintance. My wife's aunt—Avis's sole living relative, an aged lady with rheumatic tendencies—earnestly desired to see her niece happily settled in life before she ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Sympathetically.*] I understand.

RIPPINGILL.

Before she went to Bath.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Oh!

RIPPINGILL.

[*With a puzzled air.*] The whole business was—I don't use the word in its vulgar significance—stunning. It seems to me, looking back on the affair, that the moment I had proposed, my tailor was measuring me for my wedding garments; and that immediately after *that* I was wearing 'em, in the presence of the Registrar. [*Seeing* TROOD *saunter past the door on the left.*] Ah! young Trood!

MRS. LOVETTE.

What about him?

RIPPINGILL.

I wonder if he could enlighten us.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Enlighten us ——?

RIPPINGILL.

As to whether Avis has ever manifested the cheerfulness characteristic of youth.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Why should *he* ——?

RIPPINGILL.

He knew her before I did. [*Rising.*] He and some of his brother art-students were lodgers in the boarding-house where I first met her.

MRS. LOVETTE.

If it were done delicately ——

RIPPINGILL.

It might be instructive. [TROOD *appears outside the window;* RIPPINGILL *goes to the window and hails him.*] My dear fellow, I caution you—that creeper swarms with insects. [*To* MRS. LOVETTE, *indicating that* TROOD *is about to join them.*] *You* open the ball; I'll cut in. [TROOD *enters.*]

MRS. LOVETTE.

Mr. Trood, do come to my assistance. Mr. Rippingill and I are indulging in quite a hot argument.

TROOD.

Indeed?

MRS. LOVETTE.

He dares to maintain that the sense of humor is more acute in men than in women.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Behind the table on the left.*] I was instancing my charming wife—perfect—absolutely perfect, if I may say so, in all other respects ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

Distinctly unfair! I should like to have the evidence of somebody who knew her before she was threatened with the responsibilities of marriage.

RIPPINGILL.

Should you? Ha, ha! I refer you to our young friend there.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Sitting at the table on the left,* RIPPINGILL *at her elbow.*] Ah! Now, Mr. Trood!

TROOD.

[*Advancing.*] I! my dear lady, don't ask me to settle the point.

MRS. LOVETTE.

I do, deliberately. You and Mrs. Rippingill were acquainted before she met her husband.

TROOD.

I don't deny that. But in the days when Mrs. Rippingill and I—Miss Meiklejohn she was then ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

Yes?

TROOD.

In the days when Miss Meiklejohn and I were residing at Mrs. Culross's in Westbourne Terrace, I and my companions were struggling to find a fitting formula for the expression of our artistic ideals.

MRS. LOVETTE.

I see—which was no laughing matter.

TROOD.

We were hesitating—I trust I am not too technical—we were hesitating between Realism on the one hand and Impressionism on the other. [*Seating himself in the arm-chair.*] Men in that condition of mind need sympathy, not fun and frolic.

MRS. LOVETTE.

And that you got from Miss Meiklejohn?

TROOD.

[*Assentingly.*] We made that young lady the recipient of our confidences. Our custom was, I remember, to assemble upon the landing before dressing for dinner.

MRS. LOVETTE.

The landing?

TROOD.

The second-floor landing. [*Shutting his eyes.*] I have only to close my eyes to recapture the effect of the evening light streaming through the colored window. It was the curious play of that light upon the seated figure of Miss Meiklejohn which led to our giving her the name that afterwards clung to her at Mother Culross's.

MRS. LOVETTE.

The name ——?

TROOD.

Avis of the Shimmering Hair.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Shimmering ——?

RIPPINGILL.

[*Coming forward, his handkerchief to his mouth.*] Shimmering ——?

TROOD.

Hair. Its tone has become somewhat duller, if I may be permitted the remark, than it was in Westbourne Terrace. [*Drearily.*] But may not the same comment be applied generally to life!

RIPPINGILL.

[*Unable to restrain his laughter.*] Ha, ha, ha, ha!

TROOD.

[*Coldly.*] I beg your pardon?

RIPPINGILL.

Avis of the Shimmering Hair! The setting sun touched with his magic brush the luxuriant coil at the back of the shapely head, I suspect, hey?

TROOD.

Certainly. It was the consciousness of the supreme difficulty of seizing it—grasping it ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

The—er —— ?

TROOD.

The shimmer—the difficulty of transferring it to the canvas, that nearly drove us artists to despair.

MRS. LOVETTE.

And you and your friends—which school did you favor in the end? Impressionism or Realism?

TROOD.

Impressionism. But I think that some of us are gradually drifting towards Realism.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Ah! you are learning to draw a little, I suppose.

TROOD.

Yes—no—that is ——

RIPPINGILL.

[*Hearing footsteps in the garden.*] Behold! the lady of the Shimmering ——!

TROOD.

[*Rising hastily—to* MRS. LOVETTE.] Excuse me.

[AVIS *is seen to pass, first the window, then the open door on the left.*

RIPPINGILL.

[*To* TROOD.] Lunch at half-past one, as usual. You'll join us?

TROOD.

Thanks; probably.

[*He goes out at the door on the left and disappears.*

RIPPINGILL.

[*Following him.*] You'll have a perfectly delightful morning. [*Calling to* AVIS.] Oughtn't you to take a wrap, my pet? No? There, I won't worry you. [*Returning and closing the door.*] Ha, ha! Most attractive young fellow—Trood, but really I begin to doubt if *his* sense of humor is worth a two-penny ticket. Isn't it astounding! [*Hurrying across to the right and withdrawing the box from under the settee.*] Now! [*Depositing the box upon the smaller table and cutting the cord with his pocket-knife.*] Ho, ho! Avis of the Shimmering Hair! The first I've heard of that. [*Attempting to force the lid of the box with his fingers.*] Poor girl! Her association with those self-absorbed youths in Westbourne Terrace was enough to crush the spirit of a six-weeks-old kitten.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Standing, watching him—pointing to a pair of champagne-nippers which she espies upon the sideboard.*] Those champagne-nippers ——?

RIPPINGILL.

Excellent. [*Applying the nippers to the box.*] Dear friend, I own I am extremely sanguine as to the effect of these droll playthings. Heavens, I hope they include

the Wriggling Snake! The—Wriggling—Snake—is irresistible. [*The lid opens with a jerk.*] Hah! a splendid assortment apparently. Hamley, I thank thee! Ha, ha, ha! do look at these! [*Handing some grotesque dolls to* MRS. LOVETTE, *after having divested them of their paper wrappers.*] You'll assist me?

MRS. LOVETTE.

Where shall I put them?

RIPPINGILL.

On the top of the piano. [*He comes upon an elongated air-ball, inflates it, and follows it as it flutters away from him.*] The Flying Sausage!

[*They visit the box in turn and, laughing at each object as it is disclosed, move rapidly about the room, placing the toys upon the various articles of furniture.*

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Taking a doll from the box.*] The Gollywog. Ha, ha!

RIPPINGILL.

[*Taking out another doll.*] Sunny Jim. Ha, ha, ha!

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Examining the presentment of an eminent politician.*] Who's this?

RIPPINGILL.

[*Diving into the box.*] Yes! No. Yes! The Dying Pig! *Eureka!* [*Discovering a small cardboard box and giving it to* MRS. LOVETTE.] What have we here? [*Rummaging again.*] I can find no snake. Gross neglect—culpable neglect.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Opening the cardboard box and producing a small,*

heart-shaped board which has two wheels attached to its broadest part and a piece of lead-pencil at its pointed end.] *Planchette.*

RIPPINGILL.

Planchette? There's nothing laughable in that.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Evincing a certain familiarity with the apparatus.*] Laughable, no!

RIPPINGILL.

Why do they send such trash and omit the Wriggling Serpent? Dora ——

[*She lays the Planchette upon the oval table and they continue arranging the toys until the room has the appearance of a toy-shop. In the end,* MRS. LOVETTE *sinks upon the window-seat breathlessly, while* RIPPINGILL *stands in the middle of the room surveying the result of their labors.*

MRS. LOVETTE *and* RIPPINGILL.

Ah-h-h!

MRS. LOVETTE.

Superb!

RIPPINGILL.

[*Pacing the apartment.*] Dear friend, I repeat, I rest great hopes upon this display. [*With conviction.*] *This* is irresistible.

[WEBBMARSH *and* CHRISTABEL *appear in the hall.*

RIPPINGILL.

Hallo!

WEBBMARSH.

[*Taking a hat from the stand.*] Hallo!

RIPPINGILL.

Knocked off work, you two?

WEBBMARSH.

We are going for a short stroll. [*Coming into the room.*] The atmosphere has become rather oppressive up-stairs. [*Staring at the toys.*] My dear Seymour!

RIPPINGILL.

[*Winking at* MRS. LOVETTE.] Ah, you are looking at my dolls.

CHRISTABEL.

[*Who also has taken a hat from the stand, joining her husband.*] Oh!

RIPPINGILL.

[*Blandly*]. Nice lot, aren't they? This is my day for them.

WEBBMARSH.

Your day ——?

RIPPINGILL.

Yes, I have them out and play with them once a month regularly.

CHRISTABEL.

Mr. Rippingill!

RIPPINGILL.

A boyish practice—can't shake it off. You'd scarcely credit how I yearned for them while I was on my honeymoon.

CHRISTABEL.

[*Aghast.*] Haynes!

WEBBMARSH.

[*Nettled.*] Hush! don't be apprehensive for our friend's sanity, Christabel. I imagine this to be another of his irrepressible jocosities. [*Ironically.*] Ha, ha! Are you ready?

CHRISTABEL.

Ha, ha, ha! Quite.

[*With their heads in the air, they turn away and disappear into the garden. The sky becomes overcast and the light in the room diminishes.*

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Rising.*] You've put your foot in it again, Seymour.

RIPPINGILL.

[*In renewed astonishment.*] Whew! Webbmarsh! [*Suddenly.*] By Jove!

MRS. LOVETTE.

Eh?

RIPPINGILL.

The coast is clear!

MRS. LOVETTE.

Clear—for what?

RIPPINGILL.

Wait a minute!

[*He runs out at the hall-door and returns immediately carrying the gardener's ladder. This he proceeds to plant against one of the beams of the ceiling.*

MRS. LOVETTE.

Seymour?

RIPPINGILL.

I couldn't have desired a more favorable opportunity.

[*He mounts the ladder nimbly and fumbles for something behind the beam.*

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Standing at the foot of the ladder.*] Explain, or I upset the ladder!

RIPPINGILL.

[*Gleefully.*] Spare me! spare me!

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Shaking the ladder.*] I won't!

[*He descends a rung or two, holding the end of a thin cord which passes through the ceiling.*

RIPPINGILL.

[*Showing her the cord.*] A piece of cord.

MRS. LOVETTE.

So I perceive.

RIPPINGILL.

Dear friend, the other end of this is attached to the bottom of the sofa.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Sofa ——?

RIPPINGILL.

The sofa upon which the reviewer and his amanuensis sit and caress. It stands here—above my head ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

Well?

RIPPINGILL.

[*Pointing to a doll.*] A doll. [*She hands him the doll, and he suspends it by the cord.*] Dora, the episode of yesterday was no exceptional proceeding. I've observed 'em from the garden ; Webbmarsh's eyes are seldom, if ever, upon his book. He squanders the flying hours—hours which he owes to the cause of literature—in spooning. I apologize for the expression—spooning. [*Sliding down the ladder.*] Ha, ha ! [*Contemplating the suspended doll.*] You follow my theory ? I evolved it in the middle of the night.

MRS. LOVETTE.

The doll should respond —— ?

RIPPINGILL.

[*Nodding.*] Even a kiss, the gentlest pressure of the hand, should produce a shiver. [*Shouldering the ladder.*] This *must* amuse Avis, hey ?

MRS. LOVETTE.

Whoever is amused, it assuredly won't be Mr. and Mrs. Webbmarsh.

RIPPINGILL.

Of course not ; they remain in complete ignorance. [*Moving across to the right.*] There's the cream of the joke. [*Pausing in the archway.*] Would you believe it, old friend—I was drilling that hole in the ceiling at a quarter past six this morning ! [*Replacing the ladder.*] Ho, ho, ho ! Irresistible ! [*Reentering.*] Dora, may I ask for your assistance in testing the contrivance ?

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Walking away to the left.*] What next !

RIPPINGILL.

I *beg* your pardon ; you misunderstand me. [*In the*

archway.] *You* stay here and watch the doll while I, myself, go through the process of reviewing.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*At the bay-window.*] Seymour, this is dangerous ; I'll have no hand in this.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Injured.*] Dora, oblige me —— [*The pattering of rain is heard.*] Raining !

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Warningly.*] The Webbmarshes !

RIPPINGILL.

[*Leaving the archway.*] Dash ! [*Calling to* WEBBMARSH *and* CHRISTABEL, *who are seen shaking their hats in the hall.*] Back ?

WEBBMARSH.

[*Entering the room.*] In the nick of time.

CHRISTABEL.

[*Looking into the room and then disappearing.*] Isn't it lucky we hadn't left the grounds ?

WEBBMARSH.

[*Glancing at the suspended doll as he turns down his coat-collar and brushes the rain-drops from his sleeves.*] What's that ?

RIPPINGILL.

[*Innocently.*] That ? Oh, that's a simple device for attracting the flies.

WEBBMARSH.

Thought it might be more of your tomfoolery.

RIPPINGILL.

My dear Haynes!

WEBBMARSH.

[*Moving towards the right.*] Well, I'll get to work again. [RIPPINGILL *giggles incautiously.* WEBBMARSH *turns sharply and regards him with suspicion. There is a violent burst of rain, then the downpour gradually ceases and the sky clears.*] Good for the grass.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Controlling himself with difficulty.*] Yes, I was lying awake during the night fretting about the grass.

WEBBMARSH.

[*Doubtfully.*] Oh——!

[*He withdraws.* RIPPINGILL *throws himself upon the settee on the right, convulsed with laughter. The door on the left opens and* AVIS *hurries in. She is wearing* TROOD'S *jacket over her shoulders.*

AVIS.

[*Breathlessly, closing the door.*] Oh, dear me! what a storm!

MRS. LOVETTE.

Are you wet?

AVIS.

Mr. Trood is; this is his blazer.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Rising.*] Where is he?

AVIS.

Putting the boat away. I've persuaded him to ask Foley for a change of things.

RIPPINGILL.

Very prudent.

[*As* RIPPINGILL *takes the jacket from her, she discovers the toys.*

AVIS.

Why, what are these?

RIPPINGILL.

Those? Look at them, my pet; examine them.

MRS. LOVETTE *and* RIPPINGILL.

[*Laughing encouragingly.*] Ha, ha, ha!

[*She wanders round the room in a listless fashion.* RIPPINGILL *and* MRS. LOVETTE, *stretching their heads forward, watch her intently.*

AVIS.

[*Apathetically.*] Where do they come from?

RIPPINGILL.

[*Laying the jacket upon the back of the armchair.*] From town. Ho, ho! I wired for 'em yesterday.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*On the left.*] Aren't they excruciatingly funny, Mrs. Rippingill?

RIPPINGILL.

[*At the table on the right, inflating the Dying Pig.*] Avis—phu—Avis—phu! The Dying Pig! Phu ——!

AVIS.

What do you propose to do with them all, Seymour?

RIPPINGILL.

[*Blankly.*] To do with them?

AVIS.

The coachman's child had better have a few, I suppose? Then there's the cook's little lame nephew ——

RIPPINGILL.

My pet, nobody can feel more kindly disposed towards Mrs. Thompson's nuisance of a nephew than I; but, at the same time, I admit I am slightly disappointed ——

AVIS.

Disappointed?

RIPPINGILL.

I had an idea that—ahem!—that perhaps *you* ——

AVIS.

I? Oh, dolls—toys of any sort—never had much attraction for me.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Crestfallen.*] Oh—ah ——!

AVIS.

The shower is over. [*Picking up the jacket and moving towards the hall.*] I'll carry Mr. Trood's jacket up to the house and order it to be dried.

[*She goes into the garden and disappears.* MRS. LOVETTE *and* RIPPINGILL *sit, the former at the oval table, he in the armchair.*

RIPPINGILL.

[*Sighing heavily.*] Ah—h—h!

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*In sympathy.*] Ah—h—h! I am afraid my diagnosis is correct, Seymour.

RIPPINGILL.

[*His head bowed.*] Diagnosis?

MRS. LOVETTE.

Incurable.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Groaning.*] Oh!

MRS. LOVETTE.

Incurable.

RIPPINGILL.

Don't! don't!

[*They lapse into silence, he staring at the floor, she playing with the Planchette. The suspended doll becomes animated, breaking into a dance. They look at each other wonderingly.*

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Listening.*] Hark ——!

RIPPINGILL.

[*After consideration.*] Bees.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Discovering the cause of the sound.*] Ah! The doll is dancing!

RIPPINGILL.

Oh! [*Proudly, under his breath.*] What a success, Dora! What a triumph!

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Lost in admiration.*] It is indeed ingenious, Seymour.

[*They twist their chairs round, to obtain a better view of the doll, and sit gazing up at it, absorbed.*

RIPPINGILL.

[*Bitterly.*] The impostor! The arch impostor! And

these are the men whose utterances influence public opinion!

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Quietly.*] Of course, it may be that he, or she, is seated there alone.

RIPPINGILL.

Pshaw!

MRS. LOVETTE.

Or that he is merely scratching his ear.

[*The dance increases in energy.*

RIPPINGILL.

Look!

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Tenderly.*] You are right; that can be nothing but intense, ardent affection.

[*He starts up, and makes for the garden, as if to fetch* AVIS.

RIPPINGILL.

Avis! Avis——! [*Checking himself and slowly returning.*] No; I realize it—even this wouldn't do it. [*Eyeing the doll ruefully.*] She didn't notice it was hanging there! [MRS. LOVETTE *fingers the Planchette again. The doll's dance ceases.*] An interval! The reviewer now salves his conscience with another paragraph or two.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Impulsively.*] Seymour!

RIPPINGILL.

Dear friend!

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Turning her chair to the table at which she is seated.*] Give me a sheet of paper.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Crossing to the writing-table on the left.*] A sheet of paper?

MRS. LOVETTE.

I am going to consult the *Planchette*.

RIPPINGILL.

The *Planchette!*

MRS. LOVETTE.

The *Planchette*. If your wife's distressing malady *is* open to treatment, it's plain yours is at fault. [*Taking a sheet of paper from him and adjusting the Planchette.*] I am going to ask the *Planchette* to suggest a means of bringing a smile to Mrs. Rippingill's face.

RIPPINGILL.

My dear Dora, surely you are too sensible to believe in that mischievous rubbish?

MRS. LOVETTE.

Every woman is at heart a witch. Lay your hand on mine.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Obeying her.*[Oh, if you ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

Hush! [*Closing her eyes.*] Shut your eyes and let yourself go—abandon yourself. [*After a while.*] It moves!

RIPPINGILL.

You're wobbling it.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Involuntarily.

RIPPINGILL.

Pickles!

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Rising, hurt.*] Seymour!

RIPPINGILL.

I beg your pardon ; I withdraw the word, unreservedly.

[*She resumes her seat and they lay their hands on the Planchette again, and again shut their eyes.*

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*In a whisper.*] We are writing.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Opening his eyes.*] No!

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Opening her eyes.*] Ah, now you've spoiled it!

RIPPINGILL.

We *have* scribbled something.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Their heads bending over the paper.*] D—no, P——

RIPPINGILL.

N—or is it U?

MRS. LOVETTE.

It's a U. P—U—what's that——?

RIPPINGILL.

L?

MRS. LOVETTE.

L.

RIPPINGILL.

Two L's.

MRS. LOVETTE.

P—U—double L.

RIPPINGILL.

Pull.

MRS. LOVETTE.

What suggestion is wrapped up in Pull?

RIPPINGILL.

None.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Wait, wait; you're so hasty. Pull ——?

RIPPINGILL.

[*Walking away to the right.*] Pull—pull—pull—pull ——?

MRS. LOVETTE.

Your wife has just returned from a pull on the river ——?

RIPPINGILL.

That leads nowhere.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Pull—pull—pull—pull ——?

RIPPINGILL.

[*His face suddenly lighting up.*] Dora!

MRS. LOVETTE.

Found it?

RIPPINGILL.

Pullinger!

MRS. LOVETTE.

What is a pullinger?

RIPPINGILL.

Pullinger is a person. My old friend Pullinger. Pull—the first syllable of his name!

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Rising.*] Ah! And if you hadn't interrupted the *Planchette* ——

RIPPINGILL.

It *is* extraordinary. And still more extraordinary that I haven't thought of Jack before! [*Going to the telephone and ringing violently.*] If he's in town to-day, I'll have him down. [*Speaking to the telephone.*] Is that Foley? . . . Foley, put me on to Mr. Pullinger—Mr. John Pullinger, not his brother Frank—Mr. John Pullinger of Kensington Court . . . at once . . . thank you.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Crossing to the right.*] Who is this gentleman?

RIPPINGILL.

[*Leaving the telephone.*] He and his brother are the great biscuit people. You eat them with ices.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Yes, but ——

RIPPINGILL.

They're now a company—F. and J. Pullinger, Limited; John's the Chairman.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Yes, but why should a biscuit-baker ——?

RIPPINGILL.

My dear Dora, John Pullinger knows no more about biscuits than he does about anything else.

MRS. LOVETTE.

What?

RIPPINGILL.

No, no, no! I mean, there is nothing, positively nothing, that Pullinger *doesn't* know something about. Without exaggeration, he is the most intelligent man in London. Great heaven, the information that chap can give you upon the most varied subjects!

MRS. LOVETTE.

And has *he*—has *he* a strong sense of humor?

RIPPINGILL.

[*Doubtfully.*] H'm! N-n-no, I should hardly say he matches you, or me, in that department. But in a man of such universal powers you can't reasonably expect a single quality to predominate.

MRS. LOVETTE.

He doesn't exactly *sound* like the miracle-worker we are seeking.

RIPPINGILL.

[*A little testily.*] Oh, he's not a buffoon, my dear Dora, if that's the article you're in search of.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Walking away to the left.*] Really, Seymour!

RIPPINGILL.

[*Rubbing his head.*] I *beg* your pardon —— [*The telephone bell rings; he runs to the instrument.*] Hallo, hallo! . . . I want Mr. John Pullinger. . . .

I'm Mr. Rippingill. . . . Oh, is that you, Jack? . . . How are you, my dear fellow? . . . That's right. And how is that sweet, cheery old lady, your mother? . . . Eh—what——? . . . Bless me, I forgot! . . . Of course; how stupid of me! . . . Ah, well, she lived to a good, ripe age, didn't she? [MRS. LOVETTE *laughs.*] One moment, Dora. [*Resuming.*] I say, Jack! I need your advice upon a matter of considerable importance to me—vital importance. You're a marvel at helping a man in a difficulty. . . . Yes, you are, you wise old owl! . . . Are you engaged to-day for luncheon? . . . No? . . . Then come down and make the acquaintance of my wife. . . . Eh? . . . Yes, I'm referring to my new wife. [MRS. LOVETTE *again laughs.*] *Half* a moment, Dora. [*Resuming.*] Eh? . . . Oh, that's jolly! . . . Half-past one; the trains are most convenient. . . . Oh, motor, if you prefer it. . . . You've five motors? . . . Well, come in the five. . . . Ha, ha, ha! . . . God bless you! [*Leaving the telephone gaily.*] My dear Dora, this has lifted quite a load from me. Jack! [MRS. LOVETTE *has returned to the table on the left. He grasps her hand.*] Was I discourteous?

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Sitting at the table.*] Fiddle-de-dee!

RIPPINGILL.

Ah, Dora, my head—this serious anxiety! But now—I have a presentiment—Pullinger! [*The doll dances again.*] Ah, ha! The reviewer! Whoop!

MRS. LOVETTE *and* RIPPINGILL.

Ha, ha, ha, ha!

[*He skips away to the piano and strikes up a lively tune.* MRS. LOVETTE, *with closed eyes, resumes experimentalizing with the Planchette*

RIPPINGILL.

[*As he plays.*] John Pullinger!

[TROOD—*in his shirt-sleeves, and carrying the cushions of his boat—passes the window, on his way to the house.*

END OF THE FIRST ACT

THE SECOND ACT

The scene is the same as in the preceding act. There is a slight alteration in the arrangement of the furniture. The settee on the left now has its back to the oval table and faces the settee which is on the right. A single chair only remains at this table. Of the two other chairs, one stands before the writing-table; one in the centre of the room, by the piano.

All the toys have been removed with the exception of the Planchette and the suspended doll. The ladder also has disappeared.

The door on the left is closed, the hall-door open.

[MRS. LOVETTE *is lying, propped up by pillows, upon the settee on the left, deep in a novel.* CHRISTABEL *and* WEBBMARSH *are seen in the garden. Crossing from the left, they pass the window and enter the hall, where they hang their hats upon the stand.*

CHRISTABEL.

[*Looking into the room.*] Glorious afternoon, isn't it?

MRS. LOVETTE.

Perfect.

CHRISTABEL.

Seems almost a sacrilege to immure oneself. But when there is work to be done ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

Yes, duty is duty.

[WEBBMARSH *and* CHRISTABEL *disappear and* MRS. LOVETTE *resumes her reading. After a*

while, RIPPINGILL *enters the hall, coming from the right.*

RIPPINGILL.

[*Searching for* MRS. LOVETTE.] There you are! [*Approaching her.*] Where's Avis?

MRS. LOVETTE.

On the river, with young Trood.

RIPPINGILL.

Good! And the Webbmarshes?

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Glancing upward.*] Reviewing.

RIPPINGILL.

Ha, ha! [*Rubbing his hands.*] This is our opportunity. I've got him here.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Mr. Pullinger?

RIPPINGILL.

He is waiting under the eucalyptus. Are you ready?

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Putting her feet to the ground, with no great eagerness.*] Quite.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Hesitatingly.*] Er—you are impressed by him, Dora?

MRS. LOVETTE.

Forgive me for asking—he's not inclined to be a *leetle* —a *leetle* ——?

RIPPINGILL.

A little ——?

MRS. LOVETTE.

Oh, I admit he has an enormous store of general knowledge. There's no disputing that.

RIPPINGILL.

And yet is a man of the utmost simplicity—massive, comprehensive simplicity. [MRS. LOVETTE *yawns.*] It always strikes me that a couple of hours of Pullinger do more for us than our ablest historians in demonstrating the qualities that have made England what she is.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Possibly. [*Passing her hand across her brow.*] I dare say it's the hot weather ——

RIPPINGILL.

I'll call him. [*He goes to the hall-door and whistles. Presently he is joined by* PULLINGER.] Mrs. Lovette is alone, Jack—prepared for our consultation.

[PULLINGER *enters the room. He is a serious-looking, solidly-built man of fifty, with a moustache which he strokes ruminatively at intervals and a fine, square, lofty brow. He walks rather stiffly, as from gout, with the aid of a cane.* RIPPINGILL *carefully closes the hall-door.*

PULLINGER.

[*Addressing* MRS. LOVETTE.] Let me see, *what* was I telling you when we rose from the luncheon-table? Ah, yes—where to buy your tea.

MRS. LOVETTE.

I've dealt at Ropers' for years.

PULLINGER.

Go to Cramp & Peeble—a tiny shop in Foubert's Place, an insignificant turning on the left-hand side of

Regent Street as you face south. Put it down before you forget it. [*To* RIPPINGILL.] Rip, a pencil and some paper for Mrs. Lovette.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Delightedly.*] Yes, Jack.

[*He fetches several sheets of paper and a pencil from the writing-table, and gives them to* MRS. LOVETTE.

MRS. LOVETTE.

I already have a pile of memoranda about one thing and another.

PULLINGER.

I found it under your chair after you'd left the dining-room.

[*He restores to her a number of scraps of paper which he produces from his coat-pocket.*

MRS. LOVETTE.

They must have slipped off my lap.

PULLINGER.

Cramp & Peeble ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Scribbling impatiently.*] Left-hand side of Regent Street ——

PULLINGER.

Ah, but Foubert's Place ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

Yes, yes, a magnificent turning ——

PULLINGER.

An insignificant turning ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

Ha, ha! [*Moistening the point of her pencil.*] Of course.

PULLINGER.

I notice you moisten your pencil, Mrs. Lovette.

MRS. LOVETTE.

It's a habit—[*defiantly repeating the action*] a habit.

PULLINGER.

[*Pleasantly.*] A bad one, often contracted through the inferiority of the lead.

RIPPINGILL.

[*On* MRS. LOVETTE'S *right, nudging her shoulder.*] I'll be bound, Jack, that *you* could put us in the way of getting hold of a decent lead-pencil.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Under her breath.*] No, no!

PULLINGER.

I can—the best that's manufactured.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Admiringly.*] I said so!

PULLINGER.

Bousfield—an obscure artists'-colorman in the Fulham Road.

RIPPINGILL.

[*To* MRS. LOVETTE.] Isn't he wonderful! Upon my word, Jack ——!

PULLINGER.

[*To* MRS. LOVETTE.] Jot it down while you think of it.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Taking another sheet of paper.*] Bousfield ——

PULLINGER.

I can't recall the number. It's a few doors past the "Stag," where the omnibuses stop.

RIPPINGILL.

Where the 'buses stop! No detail is too trivial for him.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Writing.*] "Stag"—Finchley Road ——

PULLINGER.

Fulham Road. [*Moving away to the armchair.*] Mention my name.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Between her teeth.*] I *will.*

PULLINGER.

[*Sitting.*] Well, I was about to tell you—it is a blend of China and India.

MRS. LOVETTE.

What is?

PULLINGER.

The tea.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Distractedly.*] But we've finished with the tea.

PULLINGER.

When you've noted the proportions. Two-thirds Darjeeling Orange Pekoe, one-third Paklum Kaisow. [MRS. LOVETTE'S *papers become hopelessly deranged.*

Some fall to the ground, and these RIPPINGILL *scrambles for and returns to her.*] Now you *have* a mixture.

MRS. LOVETTE.

You're right!

PULLINGER.

D-a-r-jdouble e-l-i-n-g Orange Pekoe ——

[*There is a gentle movement on the part of the suspended doll.*

RIPPINGILL.

[*Advancing to* PULLINGER.] Jack—Jack ——! [*Pointing to the doll.*] There—there ——!

PULLINGER.

[*Glancing at the doll.*] Oh, that's the impish trick you've been giving me an account of? [*To* MRS. LOVETTE.] P-a-k-l-u-m K-a-i-s-o-w.

RIPPINGILL.

Ha, ha, ha!

PULLINGER.

Rip, you are incorrigible!

RIPPINGILL.

It will break my heart to remove it.

PULLINGER.

By-the-bye, should either of you require any cheaply-dressed dolls for gifts at Christmas, I am acquainted with a thoroughly deserving person—the daughter of a deceased naval officer ——

RIPPINGILL.

Marvelous!

PULLINGER.

[*To* MRS. LOVETTE.] Jot the address down. Miss Tickle—8, Appleton Terrace—Berkhamstead ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

But I thought we were to assemble here to discuss a remedy for poor Mrs. Rippingill's infirmity!

RIPPINGILL.

We were—we were; that is the motive for this gathering. Jack, my wife will be back to give us our Paklum Kaisow ——

PULLINGER.

Yes, yes; thanks for the hint. [*To* MRS. LOVETTE, *gravely*.] Spell it precisely as you would do it.

MRS. LOVETTE.

As I would do what?

PULLINGER.

Tickle—Miss T-i-c-k-l-e ——

RIPPINGILL.

[*To* MRS. LOVETTE.] Dora, I have furnished Jack—Mr. Pullinger—at some length, I fear ——

PULLINGER.

No, no.

RIPPINGILL.

With the salient features of the case. And he agrees with us—don't you, Jack?—that it is a remarkably puzzling business.

PULLINGER.

Remarkably—remarkably. [*Stroking his moustache.*] A young woman ——

RIPPINGILL.

Three-and-twenty.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Allowing for miscalculation, five-and-twenty ——

PULLINGER.

[*Shaking his head.*] No, I should say three-and-twenty on the outside.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Ah!

PULLINGER.

I mean, *at* the outside.

RIPPINGILL.

At any rate, young.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Married to a man still in his prime ——

RIPPINGILL.

[*With drooping lids.*] Thank you, Dora. I am forty-four.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Who is extremely well-to-do—oh, more—rich ——

RIPPINGILL.

In friends, at least.

PULLINGER.

She exchanging, I understand, the most modest surroundings ——

RIPPINGILL.

Boarding-house in Paddington ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

Tomato soup, halibut, and mutton ——

PULLINGER.

For a condition which closely approaches luxury.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Exactly.

PULLINGER.

By-the-way, if you, Rip, or you, Mrs. Lovette, are ever asked to recommend a moderate-priced but excellent boarding establishment ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Under her breath.*] My patience!

PULLINGER.

There is one in Keppel Street, Bloomsbury, at the corner of the mews on the right.

RIPPINGILL.

We mustn't lose time, Jack.

PULLINGER.

Going east—Madeira Mansion.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Hastily, to* MRS. LOVETTE.] Put it down—down with it.

PULLINGER.

And yet, reverting to your wife, in spite of her altered position—enhanced status—liberal allowance—[*to* RIPPINGILL] I am assuming liberal allowance ——

RIPPINGILL.

[*With dignity.*] You may, confidently.

MRS. LOVETTE.

You ought to keep nothing from us, Seymour—from Mr. Pullinger.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Hurt.*] I have no such desire. Do you accuse me of the attempt?

PULLINGER.

No, no.

MRS. LOVETTE.

I apologize sincerely.

RIPPINGILL.

Five hundred a year.

PULLINGER.

Ample.

RIPPINGILL.

Pro ratâ.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Generous to excess. Her trousseau amounted to little enough, I expect. Her trousseau ——? [RIPPINGILL *is silent.*] There ought to be no reserve, Seymour. Her trousseau ——?

RIPPINGILL.

Six.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Hah! And after all you have heaped upon her ——!

PULLINGER.

Not a smile.

RIPPINGILL.

Never a smile.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Devil a sm—never a smile! Now, Mr. Pullinger!

RIPPINGILL.

Now, Jack!

PULLINGER.

[*Stroking his moustache.*] Well, the conclusion I arrive at—bearing in mind that Mrs. Rippingill is at an age when the animal spirits should be at their height——

RIPPINGILL.

Yes, Jack?

PULLINGER.

Is that, either the young lady was *born* without a sense of humor—[RIPPINGILL *sits in the chair by the piano dejectedly*]—in which contingency, Rip, you will have to make the best of your bargain——

MRS. LOVETTE.

Ah, I was afraid, dear Seymour——!

PULLINGER.

Or that this is an uncommon instance of a sense of humor remaining dormant in defiance of nature, and notwithstanding the stimulating artifices which have been freely employed to arouse it.

RIPPINGILL.

In the latter event——?

PULLINGER.

Ordinary expedients having failed, it is clear that there is nothing for you but to take measures of a drastic description.

RIPPINGILL.

Drastic ——?

PULLINGER.

I don't counsel them. I recollect that when, in 93, my brother and I turned our concern into a company ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*To herself.*] Oh, lord!

RIPPINGILL.

Yes, yes, Jack, but the measures—the measures ——?

PULLINGER.

[*Deliberately.*] A violent upheaval of the stagnant forces.

RIPPINGILL.

A violent upheaval ——?

MRS. LOVETTE.

Of the stagnant forces!

PULLINGER.

Brought about by the administering of a shock—a severe shock.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Sounds pretty horrible.

PULLINGER.

The object being to shift, so to speak, at one stroke the centre of gravity.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Rising.*] Oh, no, no, no; inhuman!

RIPPINGILL.

[*Rising.*] Oh, too cruel, Jack!

PULLINGER.

Desperate, I agree; and I repeat, I am far from urging the experiment. [*Tapping his cane against the legs of the settee on the right.*] Where did you find all this light stuff, Rip?

RIPPINGILL.

[*Impatiently.*] Oh, dash the light stuff!

PULLINGER.

There's a shop in Vienna, the finest in the world for this kind of thing ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

Oh!

PULLINGER.

Kärntner Strasse. Number—number?

MRS. LOVETTE.

But what sort of a shock?

PULLINGER.

[*To* MRS. LOVETTE.] Put it down before you forget it. Rothberger & Steinmetz ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Emphatically.*] Mr. Pullinger ——

RIPPINGILL.

[*To* MRS. LOVETTE.] Oh, stick it down—stick it down! [*Snatching up her notes, she seats herself at the oval table and makes a pretense of writing.*] Jack, what sort of a shock?

PULLINGER.

Such a shock as would result from the news, abruptly communicated, of some heavy calamity ——

RIPPINGILL.

Trumped-up?

PULLINGER.

Obviously; so that the sensation of relief which ensued ——

RIPPINGILL.

[*Incredulously.*] Would do the job. Ah, my dear Jack!

PULLINGER.

Might do it; I don't vouch for it. But I defend the strict logic underlying the theory. Misfortune—deliverance; rain—sunshine ——

RIPPINGILL.

Floods of tears—shrieks of merriment. For example, if I were to get myself thrown out of my dog-cart ——?

PULLINGER.

Certainly.

RIPPINGILL.

Or your automobile ——?

PULLINGER.

Yes.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Seating himself on the settee on the left.*] With you as chauffeur, that could easily be managed, Jack. Ha, ha, ha!

PULLINGER.

Financial ruin may serve equally well.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Picking up the book which* MRS. LOVETTE *has been reading.*] Poor Avis! Restore her to auntie for a fortnight, eh? More sealing-wax soup, more woolly halibut, more sinewy mutton ——

[MRS. LOVETTE, *with closed eyes, has been manipulating the Planchette. Suddenly she utters an exclamation.*

MRS. LOVETTE.

Oh!

PULLINGER *and* RIPPINGILL.

Eh!

MRS. LOVETTE.

The *Planchette!*

RIPPINGILL.

Oh, are you at that *Planchette* again, Dora?

PULLINGER.

[*Rising and crossing to* MRS. LOVETTE.] *Planchette?*

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Showing him what the Planchette has written.*] I asked the *Planchette* to supply a key to a method of procuring the violent upheaval ——

PULLINGER.

[*Stooping to read the writing.*] D—i—v ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

"Divorce"! Isn't it queer—every letter ——!

RIPPINGILL.

[*Referring to the book.*] Of course! You've been saturating yourself with this, Dora. [*Quoting the title.*]

"Prince Kurasco's Divorce." [*Throwing the book down irritably.*] Mudie is continually annoying me in this way.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*To* PULLINGER, *putting her finger to her lip.*] How inconsiderate of us! Hush!

RIPPINGILL.

[*Overhearing her.*] Inconsiderate! Ha, ha, ha! Not you, dear old friends. [*Rising and walking away to the smoking-table, where he fills his pipe.*] Luckily, I'm not as thin-skinned as all that.

PULLINGER.

Thin-skinned! Why should you be, Rip? *You* weren't the party in error. [*Stroking his moustache.*] Divorce! Ha! strange, following upon our talk ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

Why?

PULLINGER.

I was reading, the other day, a report in one of the papers of a singular piece of negligence on the part of a man who, like Rip, had been under the painful necessity of divorcing his wife.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Shortly.*] Oh, ah?

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Rising and coming to* PULLINGER *as he sits upon the settee on the left.*] Negligence?

PULLINGER.

H'm! What were the circumstances? Yes, yes; *he* had married again too.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Sitting on the settee on the right, cramming tobacco into his pipe.*] Ha, ha! very interesting.

PULLINGER.

It was that which rendered his neglect the more disastrous.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Neglect? Neglect to do what?

PULLINGER.

To apply to the Court, according to the prescribed form, to have his Decree *Nisi* made absolute. The cause of the oversight slips my memory for the moment.

MRS. LOVETTE.

He should have done it six months after ——?

PULLINGER.

Before remarriage, at all events.

MRS. LOVETTE.

So his second marriage was a—a what-d'ye-call it? a fizzle?

PULLINGER.

Void. Fortunately the Court, after a lot of cavilling, took a lenient view of the fellow's conduct.

MRS. LOVETTE.

But in the meantime he had to explain to Number Two ——?

PULLINGER.

That she was not, in fact, his wife.

MRS. LOVETTE.

What a shock!

PULLINGER.

Shock—quite so. Now, *there* was a shock, if you please.

MRS. LOVETTE.

The poor woman's humiliation—suspense ——!

PULLINGER.

Uncomfortable sojourn with her parents or guardians ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

Months of tomato soup and halibut perhaps ——

PULLINGER.

Ending, we'll hope, in a hearty laugh at the mishap.

MRS. LOVETTE.

I see! Mr. Pullinger, you *are* wonderful! [*Checking her enthusiasm.*] Oh, but surely you don't propose that Seymour should invent such a tale?

PULLINGER.

No, no, no. It's merely curious—the *Planchette* putting the idea into one's head.

[*An inarticulate sound proceeds from* RIPPINGILL, *and his pipe falls to the floor. Turning to him,* MRS. LOVETTE *and* PULLINGER *are startled by the expression upon his face.*

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Advancing to him.*] Seymour!

PULLINGER.

Rip ——?

RIPPINGILL.

J—Jack ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

What's wrong? Are you ill?

PULLINGER.

[*Joining* MRS. LOVETTE.] You don't feel well, Rip?

RIPPINGILL.

D—Dora, this is an extraordinary development ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

Development?

RIPPINGILL.

M—m—most unlooked for ——

PULLINGER.

What is unlooked for?

RIPPINGILL.

My dear friends, I—I—I am embarrassed at having to inform you—*my* Decree *Nisi* has not been made absolute.

PULLINGER *and* MRS. LOVETTE.

Not!

RIPPINGILL.

No. [*Rising unsteadily.*] Barlow—old Barlow—Barlow ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

Barlow?

RIPPINGILL.

My solicitor—you remember him, Jack?—Barlow died within a fortnight of the hearing of my case; [*dazed*] and then—[*clasping his brow*] excuse me—then his managing clerk, also a solicitor ——

PULLINGER.

Yes, yes; Alfred Parker Gilmour—convicted of fraud ——

RIPPINGILL.

He misappropriated a spinster-lady at Wimbledon ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

No, no.

RIPPINGILL.

I beg your pardon—converted her to his own use ——

PULLINGER.

Her money, you are trying to say ——

RIPPINGILL.

Yes—and so the whole Barlow concern ceased to exist. Oh, my dear friends!

MRS. LOVETTE.

But haven't you been near another lawyer ——?

PULLINGER.

What about your marriage settlement—your will ——?

RIPPINGILL.

The aunt wished me to employ a man she knows at Bath.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Interfering old idiot!

PULLINGER.

Didn't *he* raise the point?

RIPPINGILL.

No.

PULLINGER.

This is rather a serious blunder, Rip.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Rather!

PULLINGER.

Do you mean to assure us solemnly that it utterly escaped you ——?

RIPPINGILL.

I pledge you my honor the matter has never crossed my mind till this moment.

MRS. LOVETTE.

As a specimen of gross carelessness ——!

RIPPINGILL.

I can only suppose that from the day I met Avis ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

You lost what you are conceited enough to call your head.

RIPPINGILL.

Oh, if you hadn't been abroad, Jack ——!

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Pacing the room.*] Well, here's a nice to-do!

PULLINGER.

[*Following her example.*] Dear, dear, dear! Bless my soul and body!

MRS. LOVETTE.

What do you advise, Mr. Pullinger?

PULLINGER.

Merciful powers! This reminds me of a dispute I was once mixed up with, over a patent.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Oh, does it!

PULLINGER.

You have heard I've invented an automatic luggage-label?

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Hysterically.*] No! Ha, ha, ha!

PULLINGER.

It's too heavy at present—four pounds, seven ounces ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

Don't! I shall shriek aloud!

PULLINGER.

Yes, yes; we're wandering from the subject. [*Sitting on the settee on the right.*] Our poor friend! [*To* RIPPINGILL, *who is seated in the bay-window, his back towards them, gazing at the prospect.*] Rip, how long have we been chums? Rip ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Anxiously.*] Seymour ——!

[RIPPINGILL *rises and comes forward, icily composed.*

RIPPINGILL.

[*Wiping his lips.*] Ahem! My dear old Jack—my dear old Dora—[*correcting himself*] my dear Dora—I don't know whether I am entitled to have a voice ——

PULLINGER.

Who is, if not yourself?

RIPPINGILL.

But if yes, I should be disposed strongly to deprecate anything approaching undue excitement.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Behind the armchair.*] It's all very well ——

RIPPINGILL.

It may be that my lengthy service in a Government office, where hardly a year passed in which some question did not arise demanding prompt and intelligent treatment —it may be, I say, that my official training gives me a certain advantage over both of you in dealing with unexpected crises.

PULLINGER.

Considerable advantage.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Encouraged.*] I am in a difficulty—let us concede that ——

PULLINGER.

Grave difficulty.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Ghastly.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Faltering.*] Granting the ghastliness of the gravity of the difficulty—granting the gravity of the ghastliness—of the ——

PULLINGER.

[*Helpfully.*] Granting it, Rip —— ?

RIPPINGILL.

[*Rallying.*] Granting it, what then? Why, the difficulty has to be cracked, the nut dispelled—er—faced ——

PULLINGER.

We understand.

RIPPINGILL.

Meanwhile it is essential to preserve a stiff head, hold one's upper lip erect—er ——

PULLINGER.

All right.

MRS. LOVETTE.

The other way round.

RIPPINGILL.

And to take care that one's every act shall continue to be informed by a sense of humor. We must not forget that, disconcerting as this deplorable complication is to those immediately involved, to the callous onlooker it is not without elements of gaiety. [*Sitting on the settee on the left.*] It is in this spirit, therefore, with the support of my friends, that I propose to set about dispelling the—cracking the—facing the Gordian knot in which I find myself plunged.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Advancing to* RIPPINGILL.] Bravo, Seymour! You read us a lesson. I am sorry I allowed myself to be carried away. [RIPPINGILL *takes her hand.*] I was thinking of your wife ——

PULLINGER.

[*Stroking his moustache.*] Or whatever she is for the time being ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

Poor thing! *We* may summon our sense of humor to our aid; but *she* —— *!*

PULLINGER.

[*Suddenly.*] Hah!

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Startled.*] What now!

PULLINGER.

The shock!

MRS. LOVETTE.

Eh?

PULLINGER.

[*Rising.*] The shock!

MRS. LOVETTE.

Ah, yes!

PULLINGER.

My dear Rip, this misfortune—this temporary misfortune—may prove a blessing in disguise. Here we have, thrust upon us, the necessity of putting my theory to the test.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Abstractedly.*] Theory?

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Jogging his shoulder.*] The violent upheaval ——

RIPPINGILL.

Of course—stagnant forces. Ha, ha!

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Walking away excitedly as* PULLINGER *comes to* RIPPINGILL.] Oh, gracious!

PULLINGER.

[*Standing over* RIPPINGILL.] You follow the line of procedure? You break the distressing news to the young lady—her entire mental and moral organization reels under it. Then comes a period of doubt and apprehension. This we will call, for future identification, the Interregnum. [RIPPINGILL *rises feebly.*] So far, so good. [*Buttonholing* RIPPINGILL.] You apply to the Court—the Court sympathizes, if not with you, with her. That

is the period of Revulsion. Again you go through the ceremony of marriage, and—unless I am woefully mistaken—she departs for her second honeymoon wreathed in smiles. That is the Climax.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Biting his nails.*] Ha, ha! Pretty rough time till then, Jack.

PULLINGER.

Well, well, but your sense of humor ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*On the other side of* PULLINGER.] You are resolved to take it all lightly, Seymour.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Walking to and fro.*] Haven't I said as much? [*Snapping his fingers.*] Lightly! [*The doll dances.*] Ah, dear old Haynes is up-stairs, isn't he? Bring him down. [MRS. LOVETTE *runs out, and footsteps are heard rapidly ascending and descending the stairs.* RIPPINGILL *consults his watch anxiously.*] Quite a happy accident—all my best friends round me.

PULLINGER.

[*With gusto, hobbling about.*] Nearing the tea-hour?

RIPPINGILL.

[*Replacing his watch.*] Yes.

PULLINGER.

[*Tugging at his moustache.*] Ah! ah!

RIPPINGILL.

[*Snatching a flower from a vase and sticking it in his coat—scowling at* PULLINGER *as he does so.*] You relish the situation, Jack.

PULLINGER.

Nothing, nothing since the inception of my luggage-label has held me in so tight a grip.

[MRS. LOVETTE *returns out of breath, and joins* PULLINGER *on the left. She is followed by* WEBBMARSH, *who enters quickly, looking about him and sniffing. His hair is ruffled, and one of his locks is tied up with a colored ribbon.*

WEBBMARSH.

Eh—eh? I don't detect anything.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Detect?

WEBBMARSH.

Didn't you say there was a smell of burning?

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Shaking her head.*] No.

[CHRISTABEL *hurries in and clings to* WEBBMARSH'S *arm.*

WEBBMARSH.

[*Patting her hand reassuringly.*] It is all right, dearest; there's no cause for alarm.

CHRISTABEL.

Is it out?

WEBBMARSH.

We misunderstood Mrs. Lovette, Christabel ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

I apologize for approaching the seat of learning ——

WEBBMARSH.

Learning—burning—ah! The door was rattled with such violence ——

CHRISTABEL.

[*Faintly.*] Oh!

WEBBMARSH.

[*Passing her across to the settee on the left.*] Recover yourself. [MRS. LOVETTE *fetches a carafe of water and a tumbler from the sideboard.*] The fact is, I happened to be in the thick of an intensely interesting chapter——

RIPPINGILL.

[*On the right with an attempt at airiness.*] Entirely my fault, Haynes; the interruption proceeded from me. I —ah—I—I've something to tell you——

CHRISTABEL.

[*Pushing* MRS. LOVETTE *aside and jumping up.*] Haynes——!

[*She removes the ribbon, which matches the trimming of her dress, from* WEBBMARSH'S *hair.*

WEBBMARSH.

Oh—ah—yes. [*In explanation.*] Sharp attack of headache—an excellent counter-irritant——

PULLINGER.

[*Hastening to him.*] Do you wish to know of an infallible cure for a headache, Mr. Webbmarsh?

WEBBMARSH.

[*Sententiously.*] Is there a more efficacious one than the ministering hand and unremitting solicitude of a devoted wife?

RIPPINGILL.

[*Absorbed in his own affairs.*] *Apropos* of wives, dear old friend, would it surprise you to learn that you—ah—ha, ha!—that you have the advantage of me?

WEBBMARSH.

Advantage ——?

PULLINGER.

Fold an ordinary pocket-handkerchief so that it forms a bandage not exceeding four inches in width ——

WEBBMARSH.

Thank you.

RIPPINGILL.

Yes, I—I—ah—ha, ha!—I'm not married, Haynes.

WEBBMARSH.

Not married?

PULLINGER.

Soak it with one gill of pure spirit of wine ——

RIPPINGILL.

When I say I am not married, I mean I am not married to the lady who for the last few weeks has honored me by bearing my name.

PULLINGER.

[*To* MRS. LOVETTE.] Give me a scrap of paper.

WEBBMARSH.

[*To* RIPPINGILL.] Really?

CHRISTABEL.

[*Who is again upon the settee on the left.*] Oh, Mr. Rippingill, you terrible man! How *can* you!

RIPPINGILL.

[*Earnestly.*] No, but really, really, Haynes, I ——

CHRISTABEL *and* WEBBMARSH.

[*Laughing perfunctorily.*] Ha, ha, ha!

PULLINGER.

[*Handing* WEBBMARSH *a piece of paper.*] Jot it down while you think of it.

RIPPINGILL.

Haynes ——

WEBBMARSH.

Ha, ha, ha! [*To* PULLINGER.] Jot what ——?

RIPPINGILL.

Excuse me, Jack ——

PULLINGER.

[*To* WEBBMARSH.] Fold an ordinary pocket-handkerchief ——

WEBBMARSH.

[*Producing a "fountain" pen from his waistcoat pocket, irritably.*] Oh, yes, yes, yes ——

RIPPINGILL.

Jack, may I have the benefit of my friend Webbmarsh's undivided attention for a minute or two?

PULLINGER.

Certainly, certainly.

WEBBMARSH.

[*To* RIPPINGILL.] I'm listening; [*writing*] "—spirit of wine ——"; you go on with your little joke ——

RIPPINGILL.

Joke! [*With dignity.*] My dear Haynes ——

PULLINGER.

[*To* WEBBMARSH.] What pen is that you carry?

[RIPPINGILL *sinks exhausted on to the settee on the right.*

WEBBMARSH.

[*Sitting in the armchair.*] One of de la Hay's.

PULLINGER.

[*Producing his own pocket-pen.*] This is the *ne plus ultra* ——

RIPPINGILL.

[*To* MRS. LOVETTE, *appealingly.*] Dora ——!

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Coming forward—to* CHRISTABEL.] Mrs. Webbmarsh, the information Mr. Rippingill has been struggling to impart to your husband is perfectly accurate.

CHRISTABEL.

Mrs. Lovette!

MRS. LOVETTE.

Our generous host and hostess are not at present entitled to consider themselves married people.

CHRISTABEL.

Great heavens! Haynes!

WEBBMARSH.

Eh?

CHRISTABEL.

[*Rising, her eyes flashing.*] Haynes, this is scarcely a fitting time for preparing pocket-pens!

WEBBMARSH.

Christabel ——?

CHRISTABEL.

Don't you hear! It appears that Mr. Rippingill has spoken the truth. The lady we have been induced to accept as Mrs. Rippingill ——!

WEBBMARSH.

What? [*Turning to* RIPPINGILL.] No, no, no; impossible.

RIPPINGILL.

[*With a weak smile.*] Many things are improbable, nothing is impossible—my favorite aphorism.

[PULLINGER *discreetly wanders away into the hall.* WEBBMARSH *rises and confronts* RIPPINGILL.

WEBBMARSH.

I shall feel obliged, Rippingill, in the first place, by your refraining from confounding an aphorism with an apothegm; in the second ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

My dear Mrs. Webbmarsh—my dear Mr. Webbmarsh ——

WEBBMARSH.

In the second ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

When you have been put in possession of all the circumstances ——

RIPPINGILL.

You will see that they have a distinctly humorous side.

WEBBMARSH *and* CHRISTABEL.

Humorous!

MRS. LOVETTE.

Yes, yes. The poor dear man has omitted to have his Decree *Nisi* made absolute.

WEBBMARSH.

Omitted ——!

RIPPINGILL.

Ha, ha, ha! Entirely slipped my memory, Haynes. Ha, ha!

WEBBMARSH.

[*Joining* CHRISTABEL.] My darling, I cannot adequately express my regret that this revelation, if it had to be made, has been made in your presence.

CHRISTABEL.

Well, but, Haynes ——!

WEBBMARSH.

This, however, I do insist upon—that your ears shall be sullied by no unsavory details; although, happily, you would be unable to grasp their full import.

CHRISTABEL.

[*Advancing to* RIPPINGILL *incredulously.*] But, Mr. Rippingill, do you solemnly sit there and expect us to believe that you never remembered to get your Decree rounded off?

RIPPINGILL.

Yes, Mrs. Webbmarsh.

CHRISTABEL.

[*Shrilly.*] You didn't rush into Court almost *before* your six months were up!

RIPPINGILL.

[*Rising.*] No.

CHRISTABEL.

Oh! Why, that's the very first thing that would occur to me!

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Involuntarily.*] Ha, ha, ha!

WEBBMARSH.

Ma'am! [*Drawing* CHRISTABEL *away.*] Christabel, your ingenuousness is open to misconstruction. [*Facing* RIPPINGILL.] I can tolerate much, Rippingill, in a wanton age, but not that you should have allowed my wife—this young wife of mine!—to be received into an establishment where, to employ no harsher term, the relations between host and hostess are of an irregular character.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Losing his temper.*] Look here, Webbmarsh ——!

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Coming between them.*] Seymour ——

RIPPINGILL.

You'll pardon me if, at this juncture, any question affecting *your* young wife becomes, to my mind, of minor importance.

WEBBMARSH.

Minor ——!

CHRISTABEL.

Hush! We are under Mr. Rippingill's roof, Haynes.

WEBBMARSH.

No, this is not the main building; this is an outhouse.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Minor importance! [*Referring to* CHRISTABEL.] Of course, she is of minor importance for the moment. We all are, except the little woman who has to be slapped in the face directly with this awful intelligence.

WEBBMARSH.

Has to be ——?

CHRISTABEL.

Has to be! What, isn't she aware ——?

MRS. LOVETTE.

No; or you wouldn't be here, or I—enjoying ourselves as we're doing. The stupid muddle has only just been discovered.

WEBBMARSH.

My dear madam, my dear Seymour, I have been laboring under a slight misconception.

CHRISTABEL.

Haynes, what a tragedy we are assisting at!

WEBBMARSH.

I confess, Christabel, that we ought to have been more prompt in assuming the ignorance of this ill-starred lady.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Hah!

WEBBMARSH.

But my self-reproach is lightened by the reflection that my attitude was due to the ambiguity of our friend's utterances.

RIPPINGILL.

Ambiguity?

WEBBMARSH.

[*Taking out his watch.*] Unfortunate ambiguity.

RIPPINGILL.

I will endeavor, then, to avoid ambiguity, Webbmarsh, in my method of informing you that, no matter how unsatisfactory your visit to Taplow will have been to you, it has been no less so to me.

WEBBMARSH.

[*Looking at his watch.*] If there is a decent train ——

CHRISTABEL.

No, no, Haynes; I will not forsake this girl in such an emergency.

MRS. LOVETTE.

I should think not, indeed. Seymour, no rupture.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Ignoring* MRS. LOVETTE *and advancing to* WEBBMARSH.] You were asked here—I frankly avow it—to be entertaining—funny ——

WEBBMARSH.

Funny!

CHRISTABEL.

Funny! my husband?

RIPPINGILL.

Funny. Oh, don't imagine that I have forgotten—that I shall ever forget—your story, with imitations, of the Bandy-legged Ballet.

CHRISTABEL.

The Bandy-legged Ballet!

MRS. LOVETTE.

Bandy-legged ——?

CHRISTABEL.

[*Elevating her eyebrows.*] Haynes, what is this?

WEBBMARSH.

[*Uneasily.*] Dearest, an idle reminiscence of a suburban pantomime ——

CHRISTABEL.

With imitations!

RIPPINGILL.

Ha! How often have I seen you, in response to a general invitation, pirouetting round my jovial bachelor board! *Omnia mutantur——!*

CHRISTABEL.

[*Flouncing to the window in a pet.*] Oh!

WEBBMARSH.

[*Following her.*] Christabel——!

[PULLINGER *has returned and has seated himself at the piano. He now commences, in a heavy, laborious manner, to play a light tune. The instrument being "set" with its back to the spectator, the player is out of sight.*

RIPPINGILL.

Who's that? [*Discovering* PULLINGER—*to* MRS. LOVETTE.] Stop him! [*Dropping on to the settee on the left, holding his head.*] Oh, stop him!

[MRS. LOVETTE *hurries to* PULLINGER. WEBBMARSH *and* CHRISTABEL *are indulging in a lively altercation.*

MRS. LOVETTE.

Mr. Pullinger—Mr. Pullinger——

PULLINGER.

[*Thumping at the keys.*] Rip, you should treat yourself to one of those ingenious piano-players which are all the rage.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Groaning.*] Should I?

PULLINGER.

I can give you an invaluable tip. The Simplicitas—incomparably the best and cheapest.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Sitting in the chair by the piano.*] Phew!

CHRISTABEL.

[*In the distance, to* WEBBMARSH.] You swore I knew your past!

WEBBMARSH.

You do, you do.

PULLINGER.

In oak, forty-two guineas. Jot it down while you think of it.

RIPPINGILL.

[*To* MRS. LOVETTE.] Jot it down—down with it ——!

[MRS. LOVETTE *flies to the oval table and writes, as* WEBBMARSH *advances, with an injured air, dancing with bandy-legs before* CHRISTABEL.

CHRISTABEL.

[*Eyeing him sternly.*] Ho, to be sure!

PULLINGER.

[*Playing.*] Hirschlers'—left-hand side of Maddox Street, going west—mention my name ——

RIPPINGILL.

[*Rallying under the influence of* WEBBMARSH's *dance.*] Immense, dear old friend! [*Clapping his hands.*] Ha, ha, ha! Enormous! Brilliant!

[AVIS *enters, at the door on the left, accompanied by* TROOD, *who carries her cape and sunshade. The door remains open.*

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Rising.*] Seymour ——!

[*She crosses over to* PULLINGER *and shakes him by the shoulder. He stops playing and* WEBBMARSH, *seeing* AVIS, *walks away to the right.*

RIPPINGILL.

[*Jumping up excitedly.*] Go on, Haynes! The twiddling movement! Haynes, twiddle!

CHRISTABEL.

[*Haughtily.*] Certainly not, Mr. Rippingill.

AVIS.

[*To everybody sadly.*] Ah, please don't let me interfere with your enjoyment.

RIPPINGILL.

[*To* AVIS.] If you had been here only a second earlier, my pet! Irresistible!

AVIS.

[*Taking the pins from her hat—in dismal tones.*] I think it so very kind of Mr. Webbmarsh to dance for us in this hot weather.

[*She retires to the bay-window and* MRS. LOVETTE *assists her to remove her hat.* TROOD *joins them.*

PULLINGER.

[*Coming to* RIPPINGILL—*in a low voice.*] Rip, shall I withdraw?

RIPPINGILL.

Withdraw?

PULLINGER.

While you ——

RIPPINGILL.

While I—what?

PULLINGER.

Administer the shock.

RIPPINGILL.

Dash it, you don't propose that I should blurt it all out now, with a long evening before us!

PULLINGER.

[*Disappointed.*] No? [*Pulling his moustache.*] When —— ?

RIPPINGILL.

[*Miserably.*] After dinner, perhaps, so that she may be borne straight off to her bed.

PULLINGER.

[*Brightening.*] Well, we must look forward to after dinner.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Biting his nails again.*] Look forward!

PULLINGER.

Come, come; your sense of humor ——

RIPPINGILL.

Ha, ha! yes, yes. Still, one can't help ——

PULLINGER.

I know. My dear Rip, console yourself with this—I feel precisely as you are feeling for at least a month before I address the shareholders at our annual general meetings.

RIPPINGILL.

Do you, Jack?

PULLINGER.

Sssh!

[*He seats himself upon the settee on the left as* AVIS *advances.*

WEBBMARSH.

[*Who has been in consultation with* CHRISTABEL—*standing behind the armchair, in a marked manner.*] Rippingill, I dropped a rather costly turquoise-and-enamel shirt-stud in my dressing-room last night. It belongs to a set given me by my mother. My wife and I are going up to the house to renew our search for it.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Behind his hand, to* WEBBMARSH.] No disclosure till this evening. Postpone your search till after dinner.

AVIS.

[*To* CHRISTABEL.] But why not let the servants hunt for it?

CHRISTABEL.

[*Rushing at* AVIS *and embracing her.*] Oh, you sweet, sweet thing!

AVIS.

[*Startled.*] Mrs. Webbmarsh.

CHRISTABEL.

[*To* WEBBMARSH.] I can't help it, Haynes. [*To* AVIS, *tearfully.*] My darling, forgive my husband's little fiction. Haynes has no shirt-studs, dearest; he wears buttons—and, oh, I shall be in the grounds, close at hand, when you need me.

AVIS.

When I need you!

CHRISTABEL.

[*Kissing her violently.*] Yes, yes, yes, I intend to share this terrible trouble with you. Ah, we are nearly of the same age, are we not?

AVIS.

Trouble!

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Behind the oval table, to herself.*] Meddler!

[*Throwing up his hands,* RIPPINGILL *sinks on to the settee on the right.*

CHRISTABEL.

[*Joining* WEBBMARSH, *with a sob.*] Come, Haynes!

WEBBMARSH.

[*To her, as they depart.*] Your impulses are fine, Christabel, but you have stamped me as a liar.

[*They go into the garden.* PULLINGER *rises, stroking his moustache eagerly.* MRS. LOVETTE *moves to* AVIS'S *side.*

AVIS.

[*Looking from one to the other.*] What is it? What is it? [*Entreatingly.*] Oh, what is it?

RIPPINGILL.

[*Rising.*] Er—Trood, my dear boy ——

TROOD.

[*Who has been watching the proceedings with concern, coming forward.*] Eh—yes ——?

RIPPINGILL.

I—ah—I've just received some news—er—my wife's aunt ——

AVIS.

Auntie !

RIPPINGILL.

A lady advanced in years ——

TROOD.

Sorry.

RIPPINGILL.

No, no, nothing serious ; but if you'd take two whiffs of a cigarette in the garden ——

TROOD.

With pleasure.

RIPPINGILL.

I dare say Webbmarsh will give us permission to have tea up-stairs ; join us there in five minutes.

TROOD.

I will.

[*He passes through the archway and disappears.*

AVIS.

Aunt Amy—she is unwell !

RIPPINGILL.

She isn't exactly unwell, my pet ——

AVIS.

Then she is—ah —— !

RIPPINGILL.

No, no, no ; I fancy she is *going* to be unwell.

AVIS.

Going to be !

RIPPINGILL.

Er—that is, upset.

AVIS.

Upset at what?

RIPPINGILL.

At your returning to her protection for a while, Avis.

AVIS.

I! Return to my Aunt Amy! [*Advancing to him.*] Oh, why are you so mysterious? Why deceive me? Speak plainly!

[PULLINGER, *getting rid of his stick, takes the carafe of water and the tumbler from the oval table.*

RIPPINGILL.

Er—er —— [*To* MRS. LOVETTE.] Dora ——?

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*To* AVIS.] My dear young lady, a most disagreeable discovery has been made in the course of this otherwise pleasant afternoon.

AVIS.

Discovery?

MRS. LOVETTE.

You see, your husband's solicitor—your husband's late solicitor—your late husband's solicitor—ahem!—Mr. Rippingill's solicitor ——

PULLINGER.

[*Jogging her elbow with the water-bottle.*] Water.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Eh?

PULLINGER.

[*Warningly.*] Have some water ready.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Don't fidget me. [*To* AVIS.] Seymour's solicitor—Mr. What's-his-name?—Mr. Thing-a-my ——

RIPPINGILL.

Barlow ——

PULLINGER.

[*To* MRS. LOVETTE.] Ready with the water.

AVIS.

He has absconded?

RIPPINGILL.

In a sense.

MRS. LOVETTE.

He died. He died, unluckily, before he—before ——

RIPPINGILL.

Before ——

PULLINGER.

Before completing certain indispensable formalities in —in—in connection with a case [*losing himself*] in which he represented the united interests of the shareholders of this ——

RIPPINGILL.

Shareholders!

MRS. LOVETTE.

What on earth ——!

AVIS.

Well! Well, well ——!

L. of C.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Now, my child, I am convinced you will be brave—heroic ——

AVIS.

Yes, yes, I will be strong ; I will be ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

Recollecting that the calamity which engulfs you is not attributable ——

AVIS.

[*Panting.*] Oh ! oh !

MRS. LOVETTE.

Is not in any way due ——

[PULLINGER *has poured out some water. He now passes it to* MRS. LOVETTE, *who thoughtlessly takes a gulp.*

PULLINGER.

[*Regaining the glass.*] No, no ; it isn't for you.

RIPPINGILL.

I think, Dora—if you will suffer me to say so—I think that, in making this communication to Avis, you are selecting language which is gratuitously alarming.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Hotly.*] Am I ! [*Turning away and seating herself in the chair by the piano.*] Select your own language.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Hastening to her.*] My dear friend !

MRS. LOVETTE.

Do it yourself !

RIPPINGILL.

After all these years of intimacy, surely, surely ——

[AVIS *drops on to the settee on the right.* PULLINGER *goes to her, deposits the water-bottle and glass on the small table, and seats himself in the armchair.*

PULLINGER.

[*Dragging his chair nearer* AVIS.] Listen! Can you hear me?

AVIS.

[*Faintly.*] Yes.

PULLINGER.

The Decree *Nisi* pronounced in the case of Rippingill *versus* Rippingill, Bowen, Fletcher, Hedderwick, and Rideout ——

AVIS.

Go on.

PULLINGER.

There were no more. That Decree *Nisi* has not, owing to a peculiar combination of circumstances, been made absolute.

AVIS.

[*Sitting upright.*] What—what does that mean?

PULLINGER.

It is necessary to appeal to the Court to regularize your position. Meanwhile ——

AVIS.

Meanwhile ——?

PULLINGER.

You go back to your Aunt Halibut—to your Aunt Amy ——.

AVIS.

Why—why should I?

PULLINGER.

My dear young friend, you can't continue to—to—to reside with a gentleman who is no longer—who has never been—your husband.

AVIS.

Never—not ——! [*Rising unsteadily.*] Oh! [RIPPINGILL *and* MRS. LOVETTE *have retreated to the bay-window to settle their differences. He now comes forward and* AVIS *totters towards him.*] Seymour!

PULLINGER.

[*Again seizing the water-bottle and tumbler.*] I've told her.

AVIS.

[*To* RIPPINGILL.] You—you are not my husband!

RIPPINGILL.

Avis ——

AVIS.

We—we are not married!

RIPPINGILL.

M-m-m-my pet, I shall place myself in the hands of an eminent firm of lawyers the very first thing on Monday morning. They will advise me how I stand. Personally, I have no doubt that the Court will receive our explanation with the utmost amiability—I hope, even with hilarity. Thank heaven, the English bench is rich in judges with a sense of humor. [*She sways.*] Dora ——!

[MRS. LOVETTE *brings forward the chair which stands by the piano.* AVIS *sinks into it.* FOLEY *and* BATES *appear in the archway carrying the tea, etc.*

RIPPINGILL.

[*To the servants.*] Tea up-stairs—tea up-stairs ——

MRS. LOVETTE *and* PULLINGER.

[*To the servants.*] Up-stairs.

[*The servants withdraw.* CHRISTABEL *and* WEBBMARSH *are seen in the garden. They peer in at the window and then move away.* PULLINGER *offers* AVIS *water; she drinks.*

AVIS.

But—but—but, Seymour, suppose the Court should—should refuse —— ?

RIPPINGILL.

Out of the question. They may censure me in a slight degree; they may strike Barlow off the rolls—no, they can't do that ——

AVIS.

Or—suppose we—suppose we didn't make any application to the Court ——

RIPPINGILL.

Avis!

AVIS.

[*Her head drooping.*] And—and that the mistake was allowed to remain uncorrected!

RIPPINGILL.

[*Leaving her side indignantly.*] Upon my word, my pet, I'd rather you called me a villain at once!

[*There is a brief pause. Then she raises her head and a beautiful smile irradiates her face.*

AVIS.

[*With a long-drawn sigh.*] Ah-h-h-h!

PULLINGER.

[*Looking closely into her face.*] She smiles!

MRS. LOVETTE.

She smiles!

PULLINGER *and* MRS. LOVETTE.

[*To* RIPPINGILL, *who turns to them.*] A smile!

AVIS.

[*Rising, holding her heart.*] Oh! oh! [*Laughing hysterically.*] Ha, ha, ha, ha! How—how amusing ——!

PULLINGER *and* MRS. LOVETTE.

[*To each other.*] Amusing!

AVIS.

[*Retreating to the right, wiping her eyes.*] D-d-don't look at me; it has been such a shock ——

PULLINGER.

[*To* MRS. LOVETTE.] A shock! Ah, ha!

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*To* PULLINGER, *waving the Planchette.*] Brava, *Planchette!*

AVIS.

Let us—let us have tea. [*Going to* RIPPINGILL *and patting his cheeks.*] You—you old darling! Ha, ha, ha! Tea, everybody! Ha, ha, ha, ha ——!

[*She runs out into the hall and disappears.* RIPPINGILL *follows her as far as the archway and there remains, gazing after her with an air of dissatisfaction.*

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Gratefully.*] At last!

PULLINGER.

[*Hopping with delight.*] Ho, ho, ho!

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Slapping him on the back.*] I repeat it—you are simply wonderful. [*Shaking hands with* RIPPINGILL, *who rejoins them.*] Seymour, I congratulate you.

PULLINGER.

[*Fetching his stick, and waving it in the air.*] Rip, congratulations!

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Throwing her arms round* RIPPINGILL.] I can't help it; I'm so rejoiced.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Freeing himself from her embrace, unresponsively.*] Thank you, Dora.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Pointing to* PULLINGER, *who is now pacing the room at the back.*] Don't thank me; thank *him.*

RIPPINGILL.

[*Walking away to the left.*] Oh—ah—yes.

PULLINGER.

[*Coming forward.*] No, no, he has nothing to thank me for. The illegality of the dear old chap's second union would have come to light, sooner or later, without my aid.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Still, the unerring accuracy of your theory!

PULLINGER.

[*Stroking his moustache, modestly.*] My dear lady, you would spoil a saint.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Facing* PULLINGER, *coldly.*] I am sorry to appear hypercritical; but, for the life of me, I fail to see where the unerring accuracy comes in.

PULLINGER.

[*Astonished.*] Eh?

MRS. LOVETTE.

Seymour!

RIPPINGILL.

I don't recall that Pullinger's theory provided for my wife—for Avis's laughing at the *disaster itself.* I understood—I may be more than usually obtuse—I understood distinctly that the smile was to be reserved for a subsequent occasion.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Reproachfully.*] Oh, Seymour!

PULLINGER.

Perhaps this *is* a little grudging.

RIPPINGILL.

There has been no Interregnum, you know.

PULLINGER.

[*Startled.*] Eh?

RIPPINGILL.

I put it to you—*has* there?

PULLINGER.

I—ah—I must concede ——

RIPPINGILL.

Ah! Nor has the Revulsion occurred in the manner so confidently predicted.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Shaken.*] That's true.

RIPPINGILL.

What has happened is, that it has been all Climax.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Nodding gravely.*] Yes, yes, now one reflects—it all seemed to come in a lump, didn't it? [*Eyeing* PULLINGER *uneasily.*] Ahem!

PULLINGER.

[*Thoughtfully stroking the floor with the tip of his cane —in a low voice.*] Rip, where do you get your carpets?

RIPPINGILL.

[*In an outburst.*] Dash my carpets!

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Shocked.*] Oh!

RIPPINGILL.

I tell you I am not altogether satisfied with Avis's behavior. I —— [*The suspended doll dances vigorously. He strikes his fist at it.*] Gurrrh! Confound that egregious reviewer and his gushing bride! A lot they care for my misfortunes! [CHRISTABEL *and* WEBBMARSH *have entered quietly at the door on the left. Having his back to the door,* RIPPINGILL *is unaware of their presence.* PULLINGER *and* MRS. LOVETTE *make faces at him, and* PULLINGER *taps him with his stick.*] By Jove, I'll have an A. B. C. laid on her dressing-table ——! [*To* PULLINGER *and* MRS. LOVETTE.] What—what ——?

WEBBMARSH.

Rippingill!

RIPPINGILL.

[*Turning.*] I—I beg your pardon ——

[*The servants*—FOLEY *and* BATES—*appear in the hall.*

FOLEY.

[*Standing in the archway.*] Tea is waiting, sir.

RIPPINGILL.

[*To* FOLEY.] Who—who is in the upper room?

FOLEY.

Mrs. Rippingill, sir—and Mr. Trood.

[*The servants depart.*

RIPPINGILL.

[*After a pause.*] TROOD!!

[*He makes for the staircase.* MRS. LOVETTE *and* PULLINGER *follow him, leaving* WEBBMARSH *and* CHRISTABEL *watching the capers of the dancing doll in wonderment.*

END OF THE SECOND ACT

THE THIRD ACT

The scene remains the same, and the disposition of the furniture is exactly as at the beginning of the preceding act. A bed-pillow, a couple of blankets, and a suit of pajamas on the settee on the right give evidence that the settee has been slept upon. Some articles of clothing—apparently cast aside overnight—a dressing-gown, and a couple of bath-towels litter the room. Lying upon the settee on the left, neatly folded, are a coat and waistcoat; and upon the small table are a mirror, a case of razors, a strop, a hot-water jug, a shaving-pot, a set of hair-brushes, and other toilet requisites.

The Planchette has gone, but the doll still hangs from the ceiling.

The door on the left is open, the hall-door closed. Outside, on the embankment-wall, a man's bathing-dress is drying in the morning sun.

[FOLEY *is valeting* RIPPINGILL, *who stands, haggard and aged, in the middle of the room. The man takes the waistcoat and coat from the settee on the left and puts* RIPPINGILL *into them. There is a knock at the hall-door, and* FOLEY *goes to the door and opens it.* BATES, *the parlor-maid, enters, carrying* RIPPINGILL'S *breakfast, the principal item of which is a solitary egg.*

BATES.

[*To* RIPPINGILL, *who has seated himself upon the settee on the left.*] Your breakfast, sir.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Feebly.*] Thank you, Bates.

FOLEY.

[*To* BATES, *after she has set the tray upon the oval table.*] Give me a hand, Olga.

[*The servants, eyeing* RIPPINGILL *inquisitively, collect the things scattered about the room.* FOLEY, *finding himself overburdened, attempts to add the suit of pajamas to* BATES'S *lighter load.*

BATES.

You forget yourself, Mr. Foley.

[*They withdraw. Upon opening the hall-door, they encounter* WEBBMARSH *and* CHRISTABEL. *The* WEBBMARSHES *enter as the servants depart.*

THE WEBBMARSHES.

[*To* RIPPINGILL, *sternly.*] Good-morning.

RIPPINGILL.

Good-morning.

WEBBMARSH.

May we ask how you have slept?

CHRISTABEL.

We hope, fairly.

RIPPINGILL.

Slept! [*Looking up at the doll.*] That doll has been dancing, almost without a pause, the whole night through.

CHRISTABEL.

[*Piously.*] Retribution!

RIPPINGILL.

I dozed at intervals, but only to dream of her—and young Trood. I—I could declare it's jumping now!

WEBBMARSH.

No, no, no! it's quite motionless. [*Pointing to the breakfast-tray.*] I advise you to eat your egg.

CHRISTABEL.

[*Advancing.*] Why don't you cut the disgraceful thing down, Mr. Rippingill, in a gentlemanlike spirit?

RIPPINGILL.

[*Rising.*] Because, madam, I am accused by your husband and yourself of having committed a gross breach of taste in hanging it there.

CHRISTABEL.

Can there be two opinions on the subject?

WEBBMARSH.

[*Sitting on the settee on the right.*] You would defend your outrageous prank, Rippingill?

RIPPINGILL.

With my last breath. The act was more appropriate, perhaps, to a sportive lad than to one whose bark is tossing heavily in the rolling forties; but I am incapable of transgressing the rules of good breeding. [CHRISTABEL *offers him a knife from the breakfast-tray.*] No, that would be tantamount to confessing to a modicum of justice in the charge. Let other hands remove it. [*Sitting in the armchair.*] How is my—how is Avis?

CHRISTABEL.

Radiant.

RIPPINGILL.

Her face retains that dreadful smile?

CHRISTABEL.

Dreadful?

WEBBMARSH.

I make no pretense to originality of thought or expression when I remark that a woman's smiles are nature's jewels.

[CHRISTABEL *shows her teeth at* WEBBMARSH *winningly.*

RIPPINGILL.

Avis has a rich collection of gems, then. [*Miserably.*] Are any steps decided upon, do you know?

CHRISTABEL.

[*To* WEBBMARSH.] Haynes, will you speak first?

WEBBMARSH.

[*Clearing his throat.*] Ahem! Certainly.

CHRISTABEL.

[*Coming to* RIPPINGILL.] In the meantime your egg is getting cold.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Rising.*] Dash my egg!

CHRISTABEL.

[*Wincing.*] Ssss!

WEBBMARSH.

[*Rising.*] Rippingill, my wife is unaccustomed to outbreaks of this kind.

RIPPINGILL.

I beg your pardon. [*Seating himself at the oval table and pouring out his tea.*] Well?

WEBBMARSH.

[*Advancing to* RIPPINGILL.] The matter was thoroughly threshed out over the dinner-table last night.

CHRISTABEL.

And again this morning, at breakfast.

WEBBMARSH.

Christabel—— [*She sits on the settee on the right.*] A letter—to the framing of which I have lent the assistance of a practiced pen—will accompany the communication you have already addressed to Miss Philpott. Pending the arrival of that lady from Bath, it is proposed that your existing domestic arrangements be strictly adhered to.

RIPPINGILL.

Existing arrangements ——?

WEBBMARSH.

You continue to enjoy the sole and exclusive occupancy of this boat-house ——

CHRISTABEL.

While she remains at the villa.

WEBBMARSH.

My darling ——

CHRISTABEL.

Forgive me, dear.

WEBBMARSH.

While she remains, unmolested, in the more commodious building.

CHRISTABEL.

In my charge.

WEBBMARSH.

Under the chaperonage of my wife. You assent?

RIPPINGILL.

[*Rising, tea-cup and saucer in hand.*] Oh, if propriety demands such a course ——

WEBBMARSH.

If!

CHRISTABEL.

[*Wincing again.*] Ssss!

RIPPINGILL.

[*Meekly, after sipping his tea.*] This place grows excessively chilly at dawn. I presume I may be allowed an extra blanket?

WEBBMARSH.

I think we may take so much upon ourselves, Christabel?

CHRISTABEL.

I feel sure she would desire it.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Falteringly.*] I—I should like to be satisfied upon one point. Is—is Avis still obdurate ——?

WEBBMARSH.

Obdurate?

RIPPINGILL.

On the question of our ultimate remarriage?

WEBBMARSH.

[*To* CHRISTABEL.] Christabel ——

[WEBBMARSH *makes way for* CHRISTABEL, *who*

advances to RIPPINGILL. *She produces her pocket-handkerchief—a ring is knotted to one of its corners.*

CHRISTABEL.

Mr. Rippingill, I have received instructions from my dear friend, Miss Meiklejohn, to restore you this.

RIPPINGILL.

Meiklejohn! Avis's maiden name!

CHRISTABEL.

[*Putting the ring into his hand.*] With Miss Meiklejohn's regards and best wishes for your future.

RIPPINGILL.

Her—her wedding ring ——

[*His cup shakes so violently in his saucer that it is in danger of falling. She takes both cup and saucer from him, and replaces them on the breakfast-tray.*

CHRISTABEL.

[*As she does so.*] Permit me.

[MRS. LOVETTE *peeps in at the hall-door, sees* RIPPINGILL, *and enters hastily.*

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Out of breath.*] Seymour ——

RIPPINGILL.

Dora?

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Shaking hands with him sympathetically.*] What sort of night have you passed? I am almost afraid to inquire.

RIPPINGILL.

Horrible.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Ah, you are in no fit state to receive a fresh shock.

RIPPINGILL.

Fresh ——!

CHRISTABEL.

Something has happened!

RIPPINGILL.

[*Apprehensively.*] Avis ——?

MRS. LOVETTE.

She wishes to see you, Seymour; she has an important announcement to make.

RIPPINGILL.

Announcement?

THE WEBBMARSHES.

Announcement?

MRS. LOVETTE.

She—she is engaged to be married to Mr. Trood.

[RIPPINGILL *sinks on to the settee on the right.*

CHRISTABEL.

[*Rapturously.*] Haynes!

WEBBMARSH.

[*To* CHRISTABEL.] My darling, this romance grows hourly.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Sitting in the armchair.*] I left them at the breakfast-table for barely a moment, and when I returned it was all over.

CHRISTABEL.

[*Sitting on the settee on the left.*] What a delightful young fellow!

WEBBMARSH.

[*To* CHRISTABEL.] I don't think I have told you, Christabel, that he has read my *Influence of the Russian Novelists, and Other Essays.*

CHRISTABEL.

I am not surprised.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Tartly.*] Well, you can't get off with *that* for a wedding present, at any rate.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Dully, staring at the floor, and slowly rubbing his knees.*] Nobody mentioned that Trood had been breakfasting up at the house.

WEBBMARSH.

He arrived *during* breakfast.

CHRISTABEL.

We had our work cut out to persuade him to peel a peach.

WEBBMARSH.

He has a rare independence of character—young Trood.

RIPPINGILL.

The viper! the snake in the grass! The double-faced ——!

CHRISTABEL.

Oh! cruelly unjust!

WEBBMARSH.

I fancy, Rippingill, that if you could be induced to eat your egg you would form a more equitable estimate of Mr. Trood's conduct.

CHRISTABEL.

And of *your* conduct also, Mr. Rippingill.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Rising and reseating herself beside* RIPPINGILL.] It appears, Seymour, that this young man and woman have unconsciously been in love with one another for over a year.

WEBBMARSH.

[*Sitting in the armchair.*] Each unsuspicious of the other's feelings; each equally oblivious to his own—of her own—his and her own—their own.—[*Producing a note-book and turning its pages.*] I wrote a brief description last night of their curious mutuality of sentiment, the phraseology of which is slightly less involved.

CHRISTABEL.

Yes, and their hearts' secret would have remained unspoken, unguessed, but for the sudden disclosure of yesterday. [*Rising ecstatically.*] That it was which released the torrent; and the pent-up waters, bursting down in their mad career every barrier of conventionality and circumspection, drew these young people together in a headlong, eager, lingering embrace. Oh, it's fine! it's purple!

WEBBMARSH.

[*Taking out his pocket-pen.*] Christabel, will you favor me by repeating your eloquent tirade?

[*She stands over him while he writes, dictating sentence after sentence.*

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*To* RIPPINGILL.] Ah, dear Seymour, one recalls now with painful distinctness Mr. Trood's account of the life at the boarding-house in Westbourne Terrace.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Gradually recovering his ideas.*] Mother Culross's ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

The second-floor landing ——

RIPPINGILL.

Every evening before dinner.

MRS. LOVETTE.

The light entering at the colored window ——

RIPPINGILL.

Avis of the Shimmering Hair!

MRS. LOVETTE.

Yes, the luxuriant coil at the back ——

RIPPINGILL.

[*Laughing strangely.*] Ha, ha, ha!

[*He rises and paces the room, a vindictive gleam in his eye.*

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Following him.*] Ah, thank heaven, your sense of humor is beginning to reassert itself. [*Encouragingly.*] Ha, ha, ha!

RIPPINGILL.

[*On the left.*] Ha, ha, ha! Ho, ho, ho!

WEBBMARSH.

[*Annoyed.*] Tut, tut!

[*To escape interrupting, he transfers himself to the settee on the right.* CHRISTABEL *joins him and, with impassioned gestures, continues dictating.*

RIPPINGILL.

[*Facing* MRS. LOVETTE.] Dora, I understand you to say that Avis is anxious to meet me?

MRS. LOVETTE.

Yes—yes.

RIPPINGILL.

I am prepared to receive her here.

MRS. LOVETTE.

I'll tell her.

RIPPINGILL.

Or I will wait upon her, by appointment, at the house. [*Grimly facetious.*] Ha, ha! Is she At Home this afternoon?

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Laying her hands upon his shoulders.*] Ha, ha! Bless the man, he is in the old, happy vein again!

[*She runs out into the garden and disappears.*

WEBBMARSH.

[*Glancing at the retreating figure.*] A terribly distracting person. [*To* RIPPINGILL.] Rippingill ——

RIPPINGILL.

[*Muttering.*] Avis of the Shimmering Hair! Avis of the Shimmering—— [*To* WEBBMARSH.] Eh?

WEBBMARSH.

[*Rising, tapping his note-book.*] I want you, when you have a minute or two to spare, to enable me to fill in a few *lacunæ* in these notes of mine.

RIPPINGILL.

Notes?

WEBBMARSH.

Notes concerning your unfortunate association with the charming young lady to whom I have been privileged to be of some small service.

RIPPINGILL.

And, pray, with what object ——?

WEBBMARSH.

[*Raising a hand.*] Sssh, sssh, sssh! don't be hasty, Rippingill. The details, necessary as they are for my purpose, will be obscured by artistic treatment. It is possible that your connection with the finished product will escape recognition outside a limited circle.

RIPPINGILL.

The finished product!

CHRISTABEL.

[*Seated upon the settee on the right, opening her eyes widely.*] Haynes!

WEBBMARSH.

[*Turning to her with a smile.*] No wonder you complained of my restlessness last night, dearest. [*Earnestly.*] Christabel, it has long been my ambition to add to the store of the world's creative literature.

CHRISTABEL.

[*Rising; her hands clasped in admiration.*] Oh!

RIPPINGILL.

What!

CHRISTABEL.

[*To* WEBBMARSH.] You are inspired by the startling events which have taken place here?

WEBBMARSH.

I am. [RIPPINGILL *walks away wrathfully.* WEBBMARSH *seats himself upon the settee on the left.*] I am convinced that the history of Rippingill's unprosperous conjugal adventures furnishes a motive so unique, so powerful, so prolific, that the intelligent public cannot fail to leap to it.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Returning.*] Webbmarsh, this is an indelicate intrusion on my private affairs.

WEBBMARSH.

You have ceased to have any private affairs, Rippingill. You have become simply a human document.

RIPPINGILL.

[*On the right.*] Human document ——!

CHRISTABEL.

[*To* WEBBMARSH, *standing over him.*] You are right. Yes, what a novel it will make!

RIPPINGILL.

Mrs. Webbmarsh ——

WEBBMARSH.

[*Constrainedly.*] A novel?

CHRISTABEL.

[*Closing her eyes.*] I picture the design on the binding.

RIPPINGILL.

Do you?

WEBBMARSH.

Ahem! As a matter of fact, my present inclinations tend rather towards the drama.

CHRISTABEL.

[*Dubiously.*] The drama?

RIPPINGILL.

[*Hotly.*] The drama!

WEBBMARSH.

[*To* CHRISTABEL.] Surely you will not deny, Christabel, that the drama stands desperately in need of rehabilitation?

CHRISTABEL.

Deny it! Nobody ever denies *that*. But ——

RIPPINGILL.

Now, look here, Webbmarsh! [*Sitting in the armchair.*] Whether or not the drama needs rehabilitating, I strongly protest against its being rehabilitated at my expense.

WEBBMARSH.

How typically English! [*Rising and moving towards* RIPPINGILL.] Here, then, we have a theme glowing with igneous vitality.

RIPPINGILL.

I go further ——

WEBBMARSH.

Supplied, too, by a section of middle-class society normally shallow and soulless!

RIPPINGILL.

[*With increasing indignation.*] Shallow and soulless!

CHRISTABEL.

[*Sitting upon the settee on the left.*] I have no wish to discourage you, Haynes. My only misgiving ——

WEBBMARSH.

I fathom your thoughts, Christabel. Oh, but this is not a task for one of those fellows who have the tricks of their trade at their finger-tips. [*Walking about between* CHRISTABEL *and* RIPPINGILL.] *This* is for a writer, impetuous, ignorant, who can hurl, as it were, chunks of raw, bleeding humanity upon the boards.

RIPPINGILL.

Webbmarsh, I may be—I *am*—decidedly raw ——

CHRISTABEL.

[*Catching* WEBBMARSH'S *enthusiasm.*] Ah, what a *dénouement* for your play! What an end!

WEBBMARSH.

[*Pausing.*] I doubt if it should have an end, dearest. It should, as I conceive it, belong to that order of dramatic production which is all beginning—and middle. [*With fervor.*] But no end—no end!

RIPPINGILL.

[*Sneeringly.*] Hah! endless!

WEBBMARSH.

Endless? [*Peevishly.*] No, no; the custom of late dining and early supping restricts you to the hours of nine till eleven.

CHRISTABEL.

[*Seeing* AVIS.] Ah ——!

[AVIS *enters from the garden, bright-eyed and rosy, and as gay as a lark. She is followed by* TROOD, *who carries a brown-paper parcel.* RIPPINGILL *moves over to the left as* CHRISTABEL *rushes at the young couple effusively.*

CHRISTABEL.

[*Kissing* AVIS.] Oh, you naughty-waughty duckiest of ducklings! To go and get engaged behind your Christy-wisty's back!

AVIS.

[*Lightly.*] Ha, ha, ha!

CHRISTABEL.

[*Giving* TROOD *her hand warmly.*] Monster! I ought to hate you!

WEBBMARSH.

[*Shaking hands with* AVIS.] Miss Meiklejohn, I hope that future joys are to atone amply for the sorrows of the past. [*Shaking hands with* TROOD.] Mr. Trood, may one fortunate man shake hands with another?

AVIS.

[*Approaching* RIPPINGILL.] Er—Seymour ——

RIPPINGILL.

[*Facing her, with forced composure.*] Avis?

AVIS.

Mrs. Lovette has explained? Vivian—— [*Bringing* TROOD *forward and presenting him to* RIPPINGILL.] My *fiancé.*

RIPPINGILL.

[*Scowling at* TROOD.] Nice morning.

TROOD.

[*Scowling at* RIPPINGILL.] Very. [*Advancing to* RIPPINGILL, *haughtily.*] I am indebted to you for the loan, made through your servant yesterday, of certain articles of clothing.

AVIS.

[*To* RIPPINGILL.] After the shower, you remember.

TROOD.

[*Handing* RIPPINGILL *the brown-paper parcel.*] In the altered circumstances, my spirit of independence obliges me to return them without delay.

CHRISTABEL.

[*With* WEBBMARSH *at the door on the left.*] Noble!

WEBBMARSH.

Quite, quite.

RIPPINGILL.

[*After laying the parcel aside upon the oval table—to* TROOD.] You—ah—you keep the shoes?

TROOD.

Shoes?

RIPPINGILL.

My shoes. [*Pointing to* AVIS.] You are standing in them.

TROOD.

[*Walking away.*] Ho! a joke!

AVIS.

[*Sitting upon the settee on the right.*] Ha, ha!

CHRISTABEL.

[*To* WEBBMARSH.] Exceedingly ill-timed.

WEBBMARSH.

Atrocious!

[*The* WEBBMARSHES *withdraw reluctantly.*

AVIS.

[*To* RIPPINGILL.] You may crack as many of your little jokes now as you choose, Seymour; I don't care. I consider it so proper of you not to rave and go on unreasonably: but, oh—I'll be absolutely candid with you—the tortures I have endured these last two months!

RIPPINGILL.

[*Approaching her.*] Tortures!

AVIS.

[*Looking up at the ceiling.*] What did you use, to bore that hole in the ceiling?

RIPPINGILL.

A gimlet.

AVIS.

You goose, you could have done it with one of your funny stories.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Blankly.*] With one of my ——!

AVIS.

Ha, ha, ha!

RIPPINGILL.

Do drop that maddening smile! You—you—you mean to convey that you have been bored, Avis?

AVIS.

To death. [*He sinks into the armchair.*] Whew! [*Closing her eyes.*] How often have I wished myself back in that dear, mouldy old Westbourne Terrace!

RIPPINGILL.

You were dull enough there, in all conscience, you ungrateful woman.

TROOD.

[*Advancing—warningly.*] Rippingill ——

AVIS.

In a way, I was; in the way that a girl may be dull without tumbling to it. But *since*—when I found out what Aunt Amy had done in saddling me on to a—to a gentleman with a sense of humor ——!

RIPPINGILL.

Aunt Amy! Did *she* ——*!*

AVIS.

Why, of course she did it.

RIPPINGILL.

[*His eyes bolting.*] By Jove, so she did!

AVIS.

What do *you* think! [*Rising and joining* TROOD *on the left.*] Vivian has been fearfully depressed, too. Oh, we've both had a terrible experience!

RIPPINGILL.

And for how long has this inexcusable reciprocity of feeling been existing between you?

AVIS.

We can't be positive. We *suppose* it began to grow imperceptibly at the very earliest stage of our acquaintance.

TROOD.

[*Approaching* RIPPINGILL.] On turning the matter over in my mind while shaving this morning, I came to

the conclusion that the origin of my attachment to this lady is clearly traceable to our habit of meeting upon the stairs at Mother Culross's.

RIPPINGILL.

Ah, before dinner.

TROOD.

And occasionally later.

AVIS.

[*Sitting on the settee on the left.*] There was plenty of gas-light on the second-floor landing.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Maliciously.*] That also, I assume, cast a flickering gleam upon the seated figure of Miss Meiklejohn?

TROOD.

Exactly.

RIPPINGILL.

Ha, ha! Avis of the Shimmering Hair!

TROOD.

[*Gazing, mournfully, at* AVIS'S *head.*] Its tone was wonderful in those far-off days.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Rising, a strange expression in his face.*] Well, my dear sir, I assure you you need have no apprehension of permanent deterioration.

TROOD.

Permanent ——!

RIPPINGILL.

The new tail is several shades more golden than the one she is wearing this morning.

TROOD.

The new ——!

AVIS.

Seymour!

RIPPINGILL.

The tail which came home from Marcel's last week.

AVIS.

[*Rising.*] Oh!

RIPPINGILL.

[*To* TROOD.] You must ask her to grace the dinner-table with it to-night.

TROOD.

Avis! [*She is guiltily silent.*] Avis! [*To* RIPPINGILL.] Coward! [*Walking away to the right.*] Poltroon!

AVIS.

[*To* RIPPINGILL.] You spiteful little toad!

RIPPINGILL.

[*Unnaturally calm.*] You have impelled me to this.

AVIS.

Wasp! Caterpillar!

RIPPINGILL.

The good that was in me has been stifled; there is no enormity I could not commit.

AVIS.

[*Going to* TROOD.] Vivian ——

[FOLEY *appears, entering from the garden.*

FOLEY.

[*To* RIPPINGILL.] I beg your pardon, sir—Mr. Pullinger.

RIPPINGILL.

Where?

FOLEY.

Driving his motor-car up and down the road, sir.

RIPPINGILL.

Up and down ——!

FOLEY.

[*At the oval table.*] Yes, sir—over obstacles.

RIPPINGILL.

Obstacles!

FOLEY.

I've been laying down some nails and bottles for him, sir. [*Taking up the breakfast-tray.*] He wants you to come outside and see some ingstrordinary unpuncturable tires he's running with.

RIPPINGILL.

Gurrh! [*Furiously.*] Tell Mr. Pullinger I'll see his tires ——!

[*A startlingly loud double report is heard.* AVIS *clings to* TROOD, *and* FOLEY *lets the tray fall upon the table.*

FOLEY.

[*After a pause, quietly.*] Bust!

RIPPINGILL.

[*With the utmost satisfaction.*] Ah ——!

[*With head erect, and hands under his coat-tails, he walks slowly out into the garden and disappears on the right.*

FOLEY.

[*Taking up the tray again.*] Phillips lent me some nice little nasty French tacks, ma'am.

AVIS.

[*Sitting in the armchair, sulkily.*] Foley ——

FOLEY.

[*Halting with the tray, in the archway.*] Ma'am?

AVIS.

The landau at half-past ten, to go to Cookham church.

FOLEY.

Cert'nly, ma'am.

[FOLEY *withdraws.* TROOD, *with a heavy brow, walks across to the left and sits on the settee.*

AVIS.

[*After a short silence.*] Vivian ——

TROOD.

Oh, it's of no consequence. Another illusion shattered; that's all.

AVIS.

The sneak! Those who dwell in glass houses ——! *I've* seen his *dentist's* bill.

TROOD.

It's a lack of frankness on a girl's part that hurts a man. You know how the fellows at Culross's admired you [*passing his hand over the back of his head*] on account of—on account of ——

AVIS.

[*Shrugging her shoulders.*] I've forgotten.

TROOD.

Why, you sat to me and young Claude Harker for that alone.

AVIS.

Very probably.

TROOD.

[*Bitterly.*] You needn't have sat at all; you might just as well have *sent* it round to the studio.

AVIS.

[*Whimpering.*] Oh! oh! oh! [TROOD *rises and approaches her. She transfers herself angrily to the settee on the right.*] No, thanks. I'm not to be bullied one minute and fondled the next.

TROOD.

Oh, as you please. [*Sitting in the armchair, staring at the carpet.*] At any rate, this explanation will have cleared the air.

AVIS.

[*Sarcastically.*] The shimmering 'air!

TROOD.

[*Regarding her with mingled surprise and reproach.*] Hah! "As the husband is, the wife is; thou art mated —or were recently—with a clown. And the grossness of his nature—evidently—has had weight to drag thee down."

AVIS.

[*Softening—in a low voice.*] Rats!

TROOD.

Avis!

AVIS.

[*Penitently.*] Look here! I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll make a present of it all to my maid—Rhodes. Her hair is nearly the color of mine. And then, when we are married, if ever you have to paint a head that shimmers, there she will be ——

TROOD.

[*Startled.*] My dear girl!

AVIS.

Eh?

TROOD.

A maid—when we're married ——!

AVIS.

[*Her jaw falling.*] Oh, no, I—I suppose not.

TROOD.

You—er—you had no maid in Westbourne Terrace.

AVIS.

No, anybody that came along used to lace me up in Westbourne Terrace.

TROOD.

[*Rising and reseating himself by her side.*] Dearest, why should we not endeavor to lead that blissful, dreamful, memorable time over again?

AVIS.

[*Pouting.*] Oh, I dare say I could manage to go back to the old, rotten, hugger-mugger style of existence if I tried.

TROOD.

Really, if that's your view ——!

AVIS.

Sssh! don't get wild. [*Nestling up to him.*] I realize, Vivian, that in the early days of our married life ours must be quite a humble menagerie.

TROOD.

[*Correcting her.*] *Ménage.*

AVIS.

[*Her head upon his shoulder.*] Menage, do you call it? [*Sighing.*] Still—ah!—Rhodes is only a thirty-pounder ——

TROOD.

Only a thirty-pounder! [*Starting up.*] Avis, are you aware—have you the faintest notion—of the condition of Art in this country?

AVIS.

[*With a nod.*] It's a bit off.

TROOD.

Precisely. Of course, there is always the chance of my disposing of one of my pictures under the terms of the Chantrey Bequest. But till then ——*

[TROOD. Precisely. As to my ultimately achieving fame and fortune, I have, happily, no misgivings—none whatever. But till then ——]

AVIS.

[*Making a wry face.*] Till then—economy.

TROOD.

The strictest economy.

* *In places such as Northern Nigeria and the Leeward Islands, and in any country where an allusion to the Chantrey Bequest might prove mystifying, this speech should be omitted and the words between brackets spoken in its stead*

AVIS.

[*Dryly.*] Yes. Ha, ha! My stars, I've been there.

[WEBBMARSH *and* CHRISTABEL *reenter at the door on the left, breathlessly, as if they have been running.*

WEBBMARSH.

Where is he?

AVIS.

[*Rising.*] He?

CHRISTABEL.

Mr. Rippingill.

WEBBMARSH.

We heard the report of a firearm.

AVIS.

No, that was a tire of Mr. Pullinger's motor-car.

CHRISTABEL.

A tire ——?

WEBBMARSH.

A tire merely!

CHRISTABEL.

We feared the unhappy man had expiated his faults by a bullet.

WEBBMARSH.

[*Sitting in the chair by the piano.*] It seems we need not have hurried, Christabel.

AVIS.

[*Going to* CHRISTABEL—*in a whisper.*] What do you think? Seymour has given my back-hair away.

CHRISTABEL.

Never!

AVIS.

Gospel.

CHRISTABEL.

Brute! [*Securing her own hair.*] Is nothing sacred?

WEBBMARSH.

[*Rising, and coming to* AVIS, *thoughtfully.*] In one of Ibsen's plays there is the sound of a pistol-shot.

AVIS.

But there has *been* no pistol-shot.

WEBBMARSH.

No, no; I thoroughly understand.

[PULLINGER *enters, from the garden, followed by* MRS. LOVETTE *and* RIPPINGILL. PULLINGER *is wearing an elaborate motor-costume.*

PULLINGER.

[*Advancing to* AVIS, *hotly.*] Good-morning, madam. [*To* WEBBMARSH.] Good-morning, Mr. Webster. [*To* CHRISTABEL.] Good-morning.

WEBBMARSH.

[*To* CHRISTABEL, *joining her behind the oval-table—annoyed.*] Webster!

CHRISTABEL.

[*To* WEBBMARSH.] Illiterate fellow!

PULLINGER.

[*Frowning at* TROOD, *who is behind the smaller table.*] Pish!

TROOD.

Sir!

PULLINGER.

[*To* AVIS.] My good lady, you will excuse me for saying that I am indignant—profoundly indignant—at the treatment which is being meted out to my old friend Rippingill.

AVIS.

Indeed?

PULLINGER.

I pronounce it—[*to* RIPPINGILL] I have administered the same rebuke, Rip, on many occasions in dealing with our shareholders—[*to* AVIS] I pronounce it to be neither more nor less than abominable.

AVIS.

[*To* PULLINGER.] M'yes, you are at the head of a large —business, aren't you?

PULLINGER.

I am.

AVIS.

[*Sweetly.*] As a rule, do you find any very great difficulty in minding it?

WEBBMARSH.

Ha, ha!

CHRISTABEL.

What a refreshing sense of humor!

RIPPINGILL.

[*Advancing—weakly.*] Ha, ha, ha! I am bound to admit, Jack—he, he, he!—I beg your pardon——

[PULLINGER, *stroking his moustache, turns away and joins* MRS. LOVETTE *in the bay-window.*

AVIS.

[*Vivaciously.*] Ha, ha, ha! [*Calling to* MRS. LOVETTE.] Mrs. Lovette, some of us are going to Cookham church. The carriage is ordered for half-past ten.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Sternly.*] No, thank you, Miss Meiklejohn.

AVIS.

[*Counting.*] Mr. Trood—Mrs. Webbmarsh—me. There's room for another. [*To* WEBBMARSH.] You won't ——?

WEBBMARSH.

Why not? I have never regarded church going as incompatible with the Higher Bohemianism.

AVIS.

How jolly! Shall we get ready? [*The* WEBBMARSHES *move to the hall-door.* AVIS *finds herself face to face with* RIPPINGILL.] Oh! [*Distantly.*] I am short of silver. Have you any?

RIPPINGILL.

[*Surprised.*] Silver?

AVIS.

For my thanks-offering. [*After a little consideration he selects a small coin from a handful of money and puts it into her extended palm. She views the coin with scorn.*] You haven't such a thing as a microscope about you, have you?

RIPPINGILL.

[*Sadly.*] A week ago it would have been, at least, half-a-crown.

AVIS.

Stingy! [*To those at the window.*] Tra, la, la!

[*She joins the* WEBBMARSHES, *and* TROOD, *and they all take their departure.*

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Advancing.*] Ha! This is her real nature come to the surface. Under the skin the creature is simply a pert, brazen hussy.

PULLINGER.

[*Also leaving the window, having divested himself of his motor-costume.*] No doubt of it. Like thousands of investors before him, Rippingill was misled by the prospectus.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Prospectus?

PULLINGER.

By a pretty, pearly complexion.

MRS. LOVETTE.

And a thin veneer of boarding-house gentility.

PULLINGER.

[*Hobbling about the room.*] I repeat, I am boiling with indignation.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Going to* RIPPINGILL, *who is sitting on the settee on the right, and is staring into vacancy with watery eyes.*] Still, it might be worse. You are rid of her, Seymour.

PULLINGER.

That painting puppy—Trood!

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Seating herself beside* RIPPINGILL.] You must force yourself to look upon it in that light.

PULLINGER.

These Websters—Weblings —— !

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Putting an arm round* RIPPINGILL'S *shoulder.*] And you must forget how your poor nose has been rubbed, metaphorically, in the gravel.

PULLINGER.

To think that such people encumber the earth, walk, talk, sleep, eat the firm's biscuits —— !

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*To* RIPPINGILL.] Come, come! Why, when I left you, to go back to the house, you were laughing heartily.

RIPPINGILL.

Oh, Dora, I have laughed heartily for the last time.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Don't! don't, Seymour! [*He snivels.*] That's right; there's nothing like a good cry.

[PULLINGER'S *attention is arrested by the attitude of the pair towards each other, and he stands watching them with intense interest.*

RIPPINGILL.

[*Searching his pockets for a handkerchief.*] Ah, if fifteen years ago, when I first knew you, Dora—sixteen, isn't it —— ?

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Producing her pocket-handkerchief.*] There or thereabouts.

RIPPINGILL.

If I had then been wiser, less d-d-diffident ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Dabbing her eyes.*] Hasn't Foley put a handkerchief in your pocket?

RIPPINGILL.

[*Helplessly.*] No, the neglectful beast!

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Giving him her handkerchief.*] Dear, dear old friend ——

PULLINGER.

[*Suddenly.*] Great heavens!

MRS. LOVETTE *and* RIPPINGILL.

Eh?

PULLINGER.

[*Advancing.*] Rip, what a glorious opportunity!

RIPPINGILL.

Opportunity ——?

PULLINGER.

Of revenging yourself!

RIPPINGILL.

Revenging ——!

PULLINGER.

Say rather, retaliating in kind. If Mrs. Lovette would but lend her cooperation ——!

MRS. LOVETTE.

I—I don't ——

PULLINGER.

And enable you to reconstruct your company—er—your household ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Rising and walking away.*] You must really be more explicit.

PULLINGER.

[*To* RIPPINGILL.] If you could show 'em all that you can transfer your allegiance as promptly as that vulgar young woman has done ——

RIPPINGILL.

[*Rising.*] Jack!

PULLINGER.

[*Pointing to* MRS. LOVETTE.] Placing this amiable lady in a position of wifely authority in your establishment ——

RIPPINGILL.

Jack—oh, Jack ——!

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*On the left.*] An absurd suggestion!

PULLINGER.

[*To her.*] Absurd! Putting other considerations aside, I contend that a friendship of fifty years' standing ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Sharply.*] Fifteen.

PULLINGER.

Fifteen—could have no culmination more felicitous.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Hoarsely.*] Revenge!

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Seating herself upon the settee on the left.*] Mr. Pullinger ——

RIPPINGILL.

Revenge!

PULLINGER.

Rip ——!

RIPPINGILL.

[*Crossing rapidly but unsteadily to* MRS. LOVETTE *and standing before her.*] Dora ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

I won't hear of it.

RIPPINGILL.

Listen. I cannot bring you, I do not profess to bring you, the love of a callow, inexperienced youth. On the contrary, I am a man who has passed through the furnace.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Contracting her brows.*] Two furnaces.

RIPPINGILL.

Two, if you will. But I do offer you the devotion of one whose deep well of affection, however frequently the —the—the ——

PULLINGER.

[*Helpfully.*] Bucket ——

RIPPINGILL.

No, no.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*To* PULLINGER.] Pray, be silent.

RIPPINGILL.

However frequently it has been drawn upon, is far from dry. Dora ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Breathing heavily.*] This—this is as a blow to a defenseless woman.

RIPPINGILL.

Speak, Dora.

MRS. LOVETTE.

To say that I am dumbfoundered would be to give too faint an idea of the emotions that crowd upon me.

RIPPINGILL.

Speak.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Irritably.*] I *am* speaking. What else am I doing? [*Shielding her face with her hand.*] Gentlemen, that you should both be present—both be witnesses ——

RIPPINGILL.

[*Walking away readily.*] I will leave you.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Rising.*] No, no; not you.

[RIPPINGILL *passes quickly through the hall and vanishes into the garden.*

PULLINGER.

[*Moving towards the hall.*] Rip —— [*To* MRS. LOVETTE.] He's gone.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Much ruffled.*] I was about to tell him that I must have time, time to weigh everything carefully ——

PULLINGER.

[*Returning to her—earnestly.*] Madam, at our age we have no time to spare.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Walking away to the window.*] Speak for yourself, Mr. Pullinger.

PULLINGER.

I do. Last night, for instance, lying awake feverishly, disturbed by thoughts of Rippingill's embarrassments, the notion occurred to me of constructing an air-pillow which should maintain a cool, equable temperature.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Peering out of the window in search of* RIPPINGILL.] A highly original idea.

PULLINGER.

The Pullinger Pillow, a Boon for the Sleepless! And do you imagine, my good lady, that I intend to take *time* over it?

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Leaving the window.*] You will excuse me ——

PULLINGER.

No, even while I have been talking to you and Rip, that marvelous double consciousness peculiar to the human brain has been at full pressure.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Caustically.*] Oh, has it?

PULLINGER.

[*Drumming with his fingers upon his forehead.*] There's no avoiding it, Mrs. Lovette. The design includes a small engine, driven by gas or electric power, at the bedside.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Sinking into the armchair.*] Lord 'a mercy! [RIPPINGILL *reappears suddenly, entering at the door on the left.*] Seymour!

RIPPINGILL.

[*Confronting* MRS. LOVETTE—*in hollow tones.*] Dora Lovette, I do not offer you—you can never hope to get from me—the love of an unfledged boy.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Rising with emotion.*] Seymour, if love of that sort were to grow at my feet I would not stoop to pluck it.

RIPPINGILL.

What am I to understand?

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Going to him and leaning upon his arm.*] Ah ——! [*They sit together upon the settee on the left, he with a troubled air.*] Who could have anticipated this?

RIPPINGILL.

No, we must make the best of it.

MRS. LOVETTE.

The best of it!

RIPPINGILL.

I mean, we must strive to make each other happy, Dora.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Ah, indeed!

PULLINGER.

[*Absorbed, looking at them absently.*] There is only one drawback that I can foresee.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Drawback?

PULLINGER.

Vibration.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Vibration!

PULLINGER.

Perhaps occasional oscillation.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Rising, anxiously.*] Oh, Jack, why?

PULLINGER.

Which would be fatal to the chances of repose.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Plucking at* PULLINGER'S *sleeve.*] Jack, you alarm me ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

Ah, your invention, Mr. Pullinger! [*Constrainedly.*] Ha, ha! Mr. Pullinger's invention!

PULLINGER.

Yes, Rip; a priceless, inestimable gift to mankind.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Relieved.*] Oh, your luggage-label, Jack! [*Faintly.*] Ha, ha!

PULLINGER.

No, no —— [*Rousing himself.*] But I haven't wished you joy. Bless you—[*advancing to* MRS. LOVETTE] bless you! *Apropos*—the most ravishing spot in creation for a honeymoon. It's in Wales—[*to her*] jot it down before it escapes me ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Rising and reseating herself at the writing-table—modestly.*] You bold man, you!

PULLINGER.

No trains, no post, no papers—nothing.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Discontentedly.*] No papers?

PULLINGER.

[*To* MRS. LOVETTE.] Two L's ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Writing.*] Two L's ——

PULLINGER.

Two L's—two n's—two y's—two w's—one i—t—h. [*A hand on* RIPPINGILL'S *shoulder.*] And now you proceed to fire your first bomb-shell.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Biting his nails.*] At once?

PULLINGER.

[*Tugging at his moustache.*] Send a message to your stables. Your carriage is not at the disposal of Mrs.—Miss—your late wife and her supporters.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Nervously.*] Not?

PULLINGER.

You require it this morning, to take a lady for a drive.

RIPPINGILL.

Mrs. Lovette?

PULLINGER.

Mrs. Lovette. Your coachman reports to the house—and the bomb bursts.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Rising.*] I think I should prefer a more ceremonious method ——

PULLINGER.

Have *they* observed ceremony? [*To* RIPPINGILL.] Where's your bell? [*Discovering the telephone.*] The telephone—better ——

[MRS. LOVETTE *retires to the bay-window as* PULLINGER *hobbles to the telephone and rings at it vigorously.*

RIPPINGILL.

[*Fortifying himself.*] Revenge — revenge — revenge ——!

PULLINGER.

[*After listening at the telephone.*] Come along, Rip.

RIPPINGILL.

Eh?

PULLINGER.

Sharp!

RIPPINGILL.

[*Going to the telephone and speaking to it.*] I want

Foley . . . Foley . . . What? . . . Oh——!
[*Leaving the telephone in a hurry.*] Avis!

PULLINGER.

Go back!

RIPPINGILL.

It's Avis!

PULLINGER.

[*Leading him to the instrument.*] Go back!

RIPPINGILL.

Avis is at the other end! [*At the telephone again, mildly.*] Oh, is that you, my pet?

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Coming forward.*] No, no!

PULLINGER. [*By the piano.*] } No, no!
MRS. LOVETTE. } Not your pet!

RIPPINGILL.

[*Over the top of the piano.*] What's the matter?

PULLINGER.

You are calling her your pet.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Taking* PULLINGER'S *place.*] *I'm* your pet.

RIPPINGILL.

I *beg* your pardon. The force of habit——

PULLINGER.

Go back!

RIPPINGILL.

[*Returning to the telephone.*] Are you there? . . .

Touching the carriage . . . I say, touching my carriage . . . No, *my* carriage . . . Oh, I am perfectly well aware you haven't left yet . . .

PULLINGER.

Impudence!

MRS. LOVETTE.

Unblushing effrontery!

RIPPINGILL.

At any rate, you can't have it this morning . . . Am I not intelligible? You cannot have it this morning. [*Rapidly.*] You can't have it, you can't have it, you can't have it, you *sha'n't* have it . . . !

PULLINGER.

[*Walking away to the right and sitting on the settee.*] Excellent!

RIPPINGILL.

The reason! . . . By all means . . . Don't you shout at me . . .

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Sitting in the chair by the piano.*] Minx!

RIPPINGILL.

I am going to give a lady a drive. . . . Yes, I am . . . Oh, yes, I am . . . We'll see . . . Yes, we *will* see . . . Certainly, if you desire to know . . . Mrs. Lovette . . . [*Very clearly.*] Mrs. Stanley Lovette . . . Oh! . . . [*Recoiling.*] What language . . . !

[*He drops into the armchair with a groan.*

MRS. LOVETTE.

What language? [RIPPINGILL *is silent, closing his eyes.*] A secret between us already, Seymour! *What* language?

RIPPINGILL.

She has described me as a beauty.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Shuddering.*] Vile woman!

PULLINGER.

[*Rubbing his hands together.*] However, it's *done.*

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Gloomily.*] What will happen next, Mr. Pullinger?

PULLINGER.

Easily answered. Foley or the coachman will come down for orders. [*To* RIPPINGILL.] You *give* him your orders, *and* a note to Miss—Miss ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

Meiklejohn ——

PULLINGER.

Informing her of your engagement to Mrs. Lovette. Immediate result—an exhibition of abject humility.

MRS. LOVETTE *and* RIPPINGILL.

[*Nodding their heads in satisfaction.*] Abject humility.

PULLINGER.

[*Rising.*] Shall *I* draft the note?

RIPPINGILL.

Thank you, Jack.

[PULLINGER *goes to the writing-table, where he sits and prepares to write.* MRS. LOVETTE *joins him and stands looking over his shoulder.*

PULLINGER.

First or third person?

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Decidedly.*] Third.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Rising.*] Third.

MRS. LOVETTE.

I wish there was a fourth.

[*Pulling himself together,* RIPPINGILL *takes the chair which is standing by the piano and plants it firmly in the middle of the room. Then he seats himself astride it, defiantly.*

PULLINGER.

[*Writing.*] "Mr. Seymour Rippingill——"

RIPPINGILL.

[*Dictating.*] "Mr. James Seymour Rippingill begs leave to present his compliments to Miss Avis Meiklejohn —to Miss Avis Emily Meiklejohn"—no, she is Miss Meiklejohn simply ——

[AVIS, CHRISTABEL, TROOD *and* WEBBMARSH *enter from the garden. They are all dressed for church, and are carrying prayer-books.*

AVIS.

[*Hearing the mention of her name and advancing.*] I'm here.

[PULLINGER *jumps up and* MRS. LOVETTE *utters a cry.*

RIPPINGILL.

[*Getting off his chair hurriedly.*] Avis!

AVIS.

What are you up to?

RIPPINGILL.

Madam ——

AVIS.

[*Formidably.*] What are you up to?

RIPPINGILL.

Miss Meiklejohn ——

AVIS.

Out with it! Out with it!

RIPPINGILL.

[*After a pause, bringing* MRS. LOVETTE *forward.*] My *fiancée.*

AVIS.

Your ——!

CHRISTABEL.

Haynes!

WEBBMARSH.

Christabel!

RIPPINGILL.

This lady will honor me by becoming my wife directly any legal impediment which may exist is removed.

AVIS.

[*Confronting* MRS. LOVETTE.] Well, this is a nice little game of tennis, upon my word!

MRS. LOVETTE.

Don't presume to address me. [*To* RIPPINGILL, *who is by her side.*] Seymour ——

CHRISTABEL.

Absolutely scandalous!

WEBBMARSH.

[*Producing his note-book, and sitting on the settee on the right—to* CHRISTABEL.] Hush! One of the *scènes à faire*.

AVIS.

[*Tearing off her gloves—to* MRS. LOVETTE.] You worm yourself into my house on a visit ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

Your house!

AVIS.

Until I am fetched by my Aunt Amy—certainly. I wonder if any of the spoons and forks are missing!

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*To* RIPPINGILL.] Come away.

[MRS. LOVETTE *is leading* RIPPINGILL *towards the hall when* AVIS *catches hold of him and forces him into the chair in the centre of the room. He sits there, facing the window, a passive figure, while the ladies thoughtlessly emphasize their remarks by rapping upon his head.*

AVIS.

No! Not before I've had my say!

MRS. LOVETTE.

Unless you moderate your tone ——

AVIS.

Here's a pretty turnabout! Yesterday morning, at breakfast, you were all for the advantages of remaining a widow.

MRS. LOVETTE.

Yesterday my heart had not been melted ——

AVIS.

Oh, it's a case of hearts and darts, is it!

MRS. LOVETTE.

Hold your tongue!

AVIS.

I sha'n't!

MRS. LOVETTE.

Yesterday my bosom had not been wrung by the sufferings of this unfortunate man.

AVIS.

Ho, ho! He'll soon forget his misfortunes in your tender care, won't he?

MRS. LOVETTE.

He will.

AVIS.

M'yes. You made short work of poor old Lovette though, didn't you?

MRS. LOVETTE.

Oh!

AVIS.

How's that!

MRS. LOVETTE.

If I had a pair of soiled gloves on, I'd slap your face.

AVIS.

What!

MRS. LOVETTE.

Seymour——!

[*Seizing* RIPPINGILL, *she drags him into the hall and they disappear.*

AVIS.

[*Flushed and exhausted.*] Ah, ah, ah!

CHRISTABEL.

[*Folding her in an embrace.*] Sweetest, be calm—be calm! Why upset your dear self over what is, after all, a mere trifle?

AVIS.

[*Releasing herself impatiently.*] Trifle!

CHRISTABEL

It can be nothing more. Ah, my Avis wouldn't act like the naughty dog in the manger!

WEBBMARSH.

[*Interposing himself between* CHRISTABEL *and* AVIS, *note-book and pen in hand.*] Miss Meiklejohn, there was an observation of yours to Mrs. Lovette ——

AVIS.

[*Sitting on the settee on the left, panting.*] Oh, don't bother *me!*

WEBBMARSH. Christabel! } [*Pained.*
CHRISTABEL. Haynes! }

TROOD.

[*Who has been looking on in astonishment—advancing.*] I cannot help agreeing with Mrs. Webbmarsh, Avis.

AVIS.

Can't you!

TROOD.

I utterly fail to see how Mr. Rippingill's domestic concerns ——

AVIS.

His domestic! [*Hitting the palm of her hand with her fist forcibly.*] My stars, I don't intend to stand by quietly while that woman steals my husband from under my very nose!

TROOD *and the* WEBBMARSHES.

Your husband!

[*The suspended doll dances.*

AVIS.

[*Pointing to the doll.*] Ah ——!

[*With a yell, she pushes aside those who surround her and rushes through the hall.*

TROOD.

[*Looking at the others.*] This behavior on Avis's part —most unaccountable.

WEBBMARSH.

[*Closing his note-book.*] It is at this point, Christabel, that fiction will disassociate itself entirely from fact.

TROOD.

Hark!

THE WEBBMARSHES.

What's that?

[TROOD *and the* WEBBMARSHES *move to the archway and there listen intently. The doll becomes still.* PULLINGER *is seen in the bay-window, stupefied by the events which are taking place, struggling into his motor-costume.*

WEBBMARSH.

[*To* CHRISTABEL.] Sssh, sssh, sssh! Your skirt is rustling.

CHRISTABEL.

[*Clinging to* WEBBMARSH.] Haynes!

WEBBMARSH.

To whom does the shrill voice belong?

CHRISTABEL.

To Avis.

TROOD.

I can hear nobody *but* Avis.

CHRISTABEL.

[*Stifling a shriek.*] Ah—h—h!

TROOD.

There goes a chair.

WEBBMARSH.

Or was it a falling body?

CHRISTABEL.

Somebody's coming!

TROOD.

Mrs. Lovette!

[MRS. LOVETTE, *breaking through the group, totters across the room and drops upon the settee on the left.* TROOD *and the* WEBBMARSHES *gather round her.*

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Hysterically.*] Oh! oh! oh!

TROOD *and the* WEBBMARSHES.

Mrs. Lovette!

MRS. LOVETTE.

Let me recover my breath, and then I'll get out of this

wild-beast show. The low baggage! The fiend in human form! The she-devil!

[PULLINGER *appears before* MRS. LOVETTE *fully accoutred, even to the wearing of a hideous mask.*

PULLINGER.

Madam ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*With a screech.*] Ah ——! [*Recognizing him and leaping to her feet.*] You!

PULLINGER.

[*Sadly.*] I regret to gather from your tone that my face has ceased to be agreeable to you.

MRS. LOVETTE.

It has. Considerate of you to hide it.

PULLINGER.

[*Removing his cap and mask apologetically.*] Oh! [*With deep remorse.*] Mrs. Lovette, I freely acknowledge that my calculations have not, perhaps, been fulfilled to the letter.

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Furiously.*] They never are; they weren't yesterday; they never will be. [*Following him to the right as he retreats before her.*] You—you—you are a methodical, ingenious, consummate muddler!

PULLINGER.

Dear lady ——!

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Tearfully.*] Yes, you can j—j—jot that down before you forget it.

CHRISTABEL.

[*Looking towards the hall.*] Avis ——!

[AVIS *enters with* RIPPINGILL, *her arm through his. They stand in the middle of the room silently, she with an air of complacency, he with a shifting eye.*

TROOD.

Avis!

PULLINGER.

Rip!

MRS. LOVETTE.

Mr. Rippingill!

AVIS.

Ahem! [*Presenting* RIPPINGILL *formally.*] My *fiancé.*

[*There is an exclamation from* TROOD, PULLINGER, *and the* WEBBMARSHES. *Assisted by* PULLINGER, MRS. LOVETTE *sinks on to the settee on the right.*

TROOD.

[*To* AVIS.] False, deceitful girl!

AVIS.

[*Tossing her head.*] Not at all, Vivian. Only I can't bring myself to resign my big house, and the servants, and my position generally—to that lady especially.

TROOD.

Ho! Well, it may be that Art will be the richer. [*Going to the door on the left.*] For the future she will be my sole goddess.

AVIS.

[*Sitting with* RIPPINGILL *on the settee on the left.*] Very sensible of you, dear boy,

TROOD.

[*Haughtily.*] Rippingill, I take the liberty of borrowing a boat. [*To the others.*] Good-day.

[*He departs.* MRS. LOVETTE *rises.*

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*To the* RIPPINGILLS, *witheringly.*] I suppose I may have the shandrydan to carry me to the station? I shall enjoy sitting on the platform for a couple of hours.

AVIS.

[*With dignity.*] My carriage is at your service.

[*As* MRS. LOVETTE *turns away,* RIPPINGILL *rises.* AVIS *gently detains him by holding his coat-tail.*

RIPPINGILL.

Dora ——!

MRS. LOVETTE.

Don't dare ——!

RIPPINGILL.

[*Pitifully.*] Your—your sense of humor ——!

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Relenting slightly.*] Seymour ——

RIPPINGILL.

[*Gratefully.*] Eh?

MRS. LOVETTE.

It's my firm conviction we've never had any. [*Moving towards the hall.*] That is why we have made such fools of ourselves.

[AVIS *tugs at* RIPPINGILL'S *coat-tail and he resumes his seat.*

PULLINGER.

[*Following* MRS. LOVETTE.] My automobile—if my *mécanicien* has succeeded in repairing the tires—I entreat you to go in it ——

MRS. LOVETTE.

[*Wheeling round fiercely.*] No, *you* go in it. Go to the place you recommended to me for my honeymoon!

PULLINGER.

[*Confused—holding his head.*] Recommended ——?

MRS. LOVETTE.

The place with two L's! [*To the* WEBBMARSHES.] Good-morning.

[*She sweeps through the hall and disappears into the garden.*

PULLINGER.

[*Addressing* AVIS, *humbly.*] Miss Meiklejohn, I am not sanguine enough to hope that, after the events of to-day, my visits here will continue to be acceptable.

AVIS.

[*Rising.*] Extremely kind of you to mention it. [*Walking away to the right.*] Your influence hasn't been a very wholesome one for him, has it?

PULLINGER.

[*Wringing* RIPPINGILL'S *hand—in a choking voice.*] Rip—Rip—old friend, I have invented a pillow ——

RIPPINGILL.

[*Feebly.*] A pillow, Jack?

PULLINGER.

The Pullinger Pillow, a Boon for the Sleepless. [*Glancing at* AVIS.] You shall have the first that leaves

Ja '08

the factory. [*To* AVIS.] Good-morning. [*To the* WEBBMARSHES.] Good-morning.

[*He departs as the* WEBBMARSHES, *who have been in close consultation together, come forward.*

CHRISTABEL.

[*To* AVIS, *awkwardly.*] Avis, dear, Haynes and I have just been talking your affairs over seriously. Of course I can't help feeling somewhat disappointed.

AVIS.

[*Sitting upon the settee on the right, swinging her foot.*] Sorry, I'm sure.

CHRISTABEL.

You see, I place our friendship, young as it is, upon such a high pedestal. However, I am willing to believe that what you have done has been at the dictation of a generous and forgiving nature. [*To* WEBBMARSH.] That being so ——?

WEBBMARSH.

That being so, we do not propose to withdraw our protection [*with playful gallantry*] from the fair Miss Meiklejohn.

AVIS.

Thanks awfully; but Mrs. Hopkins, the coachman's wife, is a comfortable, motherly woman.

THE WEBBMARSHES.

[*Puzzled.*] Mrs. Hopkins?

AVIS.

She can take on the chaperoning till auntie turns up. And she won't spread herself quite so much.

WEBBMARSH.

[*After a moment's pause, to* CHRISTABEL.] My darling, I think *we* will avail ourselves of the accommodation afforded by Mr. Pullinger's automobile.

CHRISTABEL.

[*In a flurry.*] Quick, Haynes, or he'll start without us!

[*They make for the garden.*

WEBBMARSH.

[*To* CHRISTABEL *suddenly.*] Wait. [*Returning and standing before* RIPPINGILL.] Rippingill, throughout the many years we have known each other, you have invariably, both in conversation and in composition, split your infinitives.

RIPPINGILL.

[*Looking up, in complete bewilderment.*] What has that to do with it?

WEBBMARSH.

Nothing—except that the practice is offensive to the cultured mind. I have stood the strain till now. Good-day.

[*He rejoins* CHRISTABEL *and they depart.*

AVIS.

Whew! Well, I'm still hostess; [*rising*] I'd better be in the porch to see 'em off the premises. [*Going.*] You may eat your lunch with me if you like, Seymour—[*turning*] with me and Mrs. Hopkins. [*Stamping her foot.*] Oh, for heaven's sake, do wake up. A girl doesn't want a man perpetually playing the giddy goat all over the shop; but a husband without a smile——

[*She leaves him. He rises painfully and, mounting a chair, proceeds to cut down the hanging doll with his pocket-knife.*

THE END

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